2012

Identity Warfare: Constructions of National Identity and the Rise of Sectarian Violence in Modern Iraq

Melanie Bellini
Wellesley College, mbellini@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection

Recommended Citation
http://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/8

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact ir@wellesley.edu.
Identity Warfare:
State Constructions of National Identity and the Rise of Sectarian Violence in Modern Iraq

Melanie Samantha Bellini

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Middle Eastern Studies

April 2012

© 2012 Melanie Samantha Bellini
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for the help and support they offered during the past eight months I worked on my thesis.

Professor Lidwien Kapteijns: A wonderful thesis advisor, professor, and editor. Wellesley College is lucky to have such a knowledgeable and helpful teacher who is always willing to work incredibly hard and provide unwavering support for her students.

My professors in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies: Professor Wilfrid Rollman, Professor Rachid Aadnani, Professor Rana Abdul-Aziz, and Professor Nadya Hajj, who have provided me with the tools, knowledge, and insight that have enabled me to complete this thesis.

Professor Joy Renjilian-Burgy: My Spanish advisor who has been a continuous source of help and support since my arrival at Wellesley.

Dr. Sandra Bellini: My mother and a great source of encouragement.

Dr. Joel Weiner: My stepfather who could always make me laugh, even in the most stressful of times.

Dino Bellini: My father and a continual source of love and support.

Travis Weiner: A wonderful brother and friend, whose experiences while on tour in Iraq (September 2005-October 2006, and October 2007-November 2008) as part of the United States Army (502nd Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division) served as the inspiration for my thesis and to whom this work is dedicated.

Priya Agarwal-Harding: My best friend and roommate since our first year at Wellesley.

The women of Zeta Alpha: A group of inspirational women who have listened to me all year and who have offered support and laughter in times of need.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 7

Ch. I. Imagining Iraq:
The Origins of Politicized Ethno-religious Identities under the British Mandate

Introduction to the Mandate Era ................................................................................... 17
British Justifications for the Mandate ............................................................................ 19
Centralizing Sunni Power ............................................................................................... 21
Faisal: The First King of Iraq .......................................................................................... 25
Ramifications for the Shia under the New Administration .......................................... 29
The Kurds: A Challenge to the New Nation ................................................................. 33
Strategies for Constructing a National Identity ............................................................. 36
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 40

Ch. II. The Politics of Violence: State-sponsored Religious and Ethnic Violence under the Dictatorship of Saddam Hussein

Introduction: From the Mandate to Saddam’s Dictatorship ........................................... 42
The Rise of Saddam Hussein ........................................................................................... 43
History of the Ba’ath Party ............................................................................................... 46
Dimensions of Iraqi Identity under Saddam Hussein ..................................................... 50
Political Oppression Under Saddam’s Regime ............................................................. 52
Saddam’s Political Manipulation of Shia Identity .......................................................... 53
The Genocide of the Kurds .............................................................................................. 56
The Invasion of Kuwait and Saddam’s Use of Violence in “The Shia Uprisings” .......... 60
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 67

Chapter III. The Collapse: American Occupation of Iraq and its Legacy

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 70
Background to the American Invasion of Iraq in 2003 ..................................................... 72
The U.S.-led Coalition’s Invasion of Iraq and the Downfall of Saddam Hussein .......... 73
Establishing Military Rule and De-Ba’athification ......................................................... 75
Constructing a New Iraqi Administration ...................................................................... 77
Iraq’s First Democratic Elections of 2005: Successes, Failures, and Consequences ... 79
Escalating Sectarian Tensions in the Iraqi Government 82
The Rise of Sectarian Militias in Iraq 84
The Establishment of Shia Militias 86
Causes, Dimensions, and Consequences of the Sunni Insurgency 90
Kurdish Militias and the Struggle for Kurdish Autonomy 95
The Culmination of Sectarian Violence in Iraq- Fallujah and “The Surge” 98
Conclusion 101

Conclusion 104
Figure 1. The Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra prior to the British Mandate.

Figure 2. Map of modern Iraq
Figure 3. Map of modern Iraq according to population distribution by ethnic or religious background
Introduction
Throughout the most recent decade of the United States’ history, the government’s participation in what has been characterized as humanitarian military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan has generally been one of the most contested and debated issues in the media and in political discourse\(^{1}\). Since 2003, the US Coalition’s involvement in Iraq has included the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime, the establishment of a new Iraqi administration, and military efforts against militias such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Mahdi Army. While the US-led Coalition’s stated primary objectives following the invasion of Iraq included the reestablishment of stability and security following the change in administration, it has instead witnessed the collapse of the state and the fragmentation of the Iraqi political scene along ethnic and religious lines. In the absence of a stable, fair, and efficient government and military, foreign and domestic militia groups have gained an enormous amount of power and subjected Iraqi civilians to acts of violence based on their ethnic or religious identity, making it nearly impossible for them to rebuild their society after years of hardship and instability.

The primary issue of public debate about the actions of the United States in Iraq is most often whether or not the US was justified in its military intervention and the destruction of the Iraqi state. While this issue will featured in Chapter Three, it will not serve as the central focus of my research. Instead, I seek to evaluate the effects of the US-led Coalition’s activities in Iraq on the fragmentation of Iraqi society and the development of extremist militias that use violence against civilians in order to gain political power. Overall, this essay will investigate and analyze the concept of identity, how the state uses identity as a political tool, and how violence is used to enforce this vision of identity.

To understand the origins and causes of communal violence as seen today in Iraq, I chose to take a historical approach. In particular, this thesis will focus on the role of the past and present governments in shaping different constructions of Iraqi national identity as a political tool. My research is divided into three main sections focusing on three of the most prominent governments in Iraq’s modern history; the British Mandate (1914-1932), Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party dictatorship (1979-2003), and the American occupation (2003-present).

Several key concepts inform my research as they go to the core of the issues studied here. They will be explored and analyzed within the context of each regime and associated historical period include nationalism, political identity, communal identity, religion, ethnicity, colonialism, and neopatrimonialism. Essential questions to keep in mind while analyzing these themes within each historical period include; What was the role of the state in constructing a national identity?, What role did foreign influence or intervention play in the construction or enforcement of these identities?, When and how was violence introduced as a tool of the state for molding identity?, and How, why, and when did relations among civilians break down and develop into full-scale sectarian violence?. By using these key concepts to answer these questions, I seek to uncover and analyze the impact of the policies of successive administrations on the current ethnic/religious fragmentation of Iraqi politics and society.

Chapter One will predominantly focus on the role of the state in constructing a national Iraqi identity during the British Mandate period from 1914-1932. Throughout the Middle East during this time, powerful European nation states were carving up the remnants of the ailing Ottoman Empire even before its official demise following World War I. Vast stretches of land that were once under Ottoman jurisdiction were carved up into new nation states whose borders

---

corresponded with the economic and political interests of European imperialist powers. This disregard for the wishes of the existing indigenous population in favor of foreign interests would become a major roadblock to the construction of a strong, unified polity in Iraq and other former Ottoman protectorates such as Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. In Iraq, British officers attempted to construct an Iraqi identity that would inspire feelings of commonality and nationalism among the Iraqi people, but not one that would be strong enough to overpower the economic and political interests of the British Empire, which the new Iraqi administration was designed to favor.

Nationalism, colonialism and political identity are several prominent concepts and themes that will be focused on in this chapter. Questions that guide narrative in this chapter include, What were the dimensions of the Iraqi national identity being propagated by the British, and why were these chosen?, How did British perceptions and manipulation of different Iraqi communities impact the construction of the new Iraqi government?, and How did the British vision of Iraqi nationalism differ from that of King Faisal I and Jafar Pasha?

The British tried to create a constitutional monarchy, ruled by members of the Arab elite in public and by British officers such as Percy Cox in private. Deeply influenced by Europe’s racist social attitudes and imperialist policies, these British officers fashioned a government administration that incorporated the previous Ottoman tendency to favor members of the ruling (and not necessarily local) Sunni aristocracy, and built upon this system of Sunni favoritism by formalizing the political marginalization of the Shia majority and many minority groups under the law. Since this period, many Iraqi civilians and politicians have abhorred such racist

---

exclusionary policies that are disadvantageous to the majority of the population, but the roots of this system shaped Iraqi state and society in the decades that follow.

Within Chapter One about the British Mandate, as in those that follow, I will attempt to strike a balance between maintaining a diversity of sources and focusing on those sources that are most relevant to my research topic. Among the set of sources consulted in this chapter, I found the primary sources, including letters written by Gertrude Bell, Jafar Pasha, and King Faisal I particularly insightful. Bell’s letters showed the extent of British favoritism of the Sunni minority and mistrust of the other factions of the Iraqi population. In contrast, in their private letters to one another, Faisal and Jafar Pasha revealed the political struggles of those who considered themselves to be Iraqi nationals of trying to do what was best for their country and people, but being limited by the oppressive power of a foreign occupation. The product of this compromise, while well intentioned, laid the foundation for many of the political and social struggles seen in Iraq today. I also relied on the scholarship of several historians, including most prominently Guiditta Fontana. In her article *Creating Nations, Establishing States: Ethno-religious Heterogeneity and the British Creation of Iraq in 1919-1923*, she investigates the policies in the early years of the British occupation and their effect on how ethnic and religious communities in their related to the new Iraqi state. The combination of primary and secondary sources, in addition to sources that gave a voice to both foreign administrators and Iraqi citizens, allowed me to gain a more well-rounded and comprehensive perspectives on this period of Iraq’s history.

Chapter Two will give a brief summary of the change in administrations following the end of the British Mandate and resume the narrative with the rise of the Ba’ath Party, particularly

---

under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein from 1979-2003. During this period, Iraq witnessed the rise to power of a despotic ruler with absolute power over and zero tolerance for political dissent. Through organized killings of alleged or real political enemies within the Ba’ath Party, Hussein shaped Iraq’s government in such a way that it began to conform to his political vision, that of absolute, personal rule. Increasingly paranoid and suspicious of even his most trusted compatriots, the dictator continued to consolidate his power until the Party represented little more than an inner circle Saddam’s relatives and tribal members. Questions that will be posed and discussed in this chapter include; How did Saddam change the existing concept of Iraqi national identity to suit his own political goals?, When and why did Saddam begin to use state-sponsored violence against civilians to divide and rule his subjects to maximize his power?, and How did Saddam portray or justify large-scale acts of violence against specific communities to the Iraqi population?

There exists a great deal of scholarship focusing on Iraq under the Ba’ath Party and Hussein’s dictatorship. However, there are fewer primary sources for this period than for the Mandate chapter due to the state’s heavy use of censorship and repression during this period. I therefore used primarily secondary sources but focused on those that include first-hand accounts that give a voice to Iraqis who witnessed or were subjected to atrocities during this period, along with the most relevant analytical scholarship. For example, I relied on Kevin Woods’ study entitled *The Saddam Tapes: the Inner Workings of a Tyrant’s Regime* to reveal the inner workings of Hussein’s regime. This book is composed of translations of videotape and audiotape recordings of Ba’ath Party meetings during Hussein’s presidency. In particular, it reveals some of his cabinet members’ perspectives on controversial state activities such as the Anfal Campaign and the American involvement during the Gulf War. In addition, collections of

---

interviews of Iraqi refugees in Turkey, Iran, and Syria by Human Rights Watch provided
eyewitness accounts of Hussein’s gross violations of human rights during the genocide against
the Kurds and episode large-scale violence against civilians in Basra in what came to be known
as “The Shia Uprisings”. Secondary sources such as Sandra Mackey’s *The Reckoning: Iraq and
the Legacy of Saddam Hussein* offer academic analysis of many themes central to this chapter.
Adeed Dawisha’s article, "Identity" and Political Survival in Saddam's Iraq, was particularly
helpful in exploring the political manipulation of national identity during this period. Overall,
these sources among others used throughout the chapter helped to provide a balance between
eyewitness accounts of Iraqi experiences during Hussein’s dictatorship and scholarly analysis of
identity and state-sponsored violence.

Chapter Three will focus on the role of the U.S.-led Coalition played in the collapse of
the Iraqi state and the development of communal violence from 2003 to the present. Following
the Gulf War and the invasion of Kuwait, Iraq suffered under decade-long debilitating economic
sanctions that impoverished its population and weakened, but did not defeat, Saddam Hussein’s
dictatorship.⁹ In 2003, U.S. military forces invaded Iraq, topped Hussein’s regime and army, and
attempted to reconstruct a government and armed forces that would ensure stability and security
throughout the country and guarantee equal treatment under the law for all Iraqi citizens.
However, what resulted from these efforts was the collapse of Iraqi state, followed by the
fragmentation of Iraqi society across ethnic and religious lines. The chapter will trace the
evolution of political faction and religiously based militia groups that utilized sectarian
ideologies to commit large-scale acts of violence against civilian and attempt to isolate and
analyze and main reasons behind this movement. Some of the most central questions guiding my

---

analysis of this historical period include, Why did the use of large-scale violence to enforce a particular interpretation of Iraqi identity change and move from state to civilian hands at this particular time, as opposed to other tumultuous and unstable periods of Iraq’s history? What are the most essential contributing factors to the rise of sectarian violence in Iraq? To what extent is the United States responsible for the collapse of Iraqi society and political conflict with factions and militias based on sectarian identities?, and What role did Iraqi agency play in the fragmentation of society and the development of large-scale violence against civilians?.

This chapter will rely on a combination of primary and secondary sources focusing on Iraq from 2003 to the present in order to achieve a comprehensive view on Iraq’s current situation from both an academic as well as a ground level perspective. It has been one of my goals throughout the thesis is to present Iraqi perspectives and experiences whenever possible, since I was unable, for obvious reasons, to conduct my own interviews and research in Iraq. To achieve this goal for this specific time period, I relied mainly on the interviews compiled by Time Magazine reporter Mark Kukis in his collection *Voices from Iraq: A People's History, 2003-2009*, which includes interviews with Iraqi citizens about their opinions of the American Occupation and its effects on Iraqi lives. Nathan Gonzalez’s study entitled, *The Sunni-Shia Conflict: Understanding Sectarian Violence in the Middle East*, represents a scholarly analysis of the background history of sectarian violence in the Middle East and provided a solid background for my own analysis. In order to understand the US military actions in Iraq from an American perspective, I relied on military journals such as *Parameters* and *Joint Force Quarterly*, which provided insightful into the challenges to maintaining stability in the country and combating powerful foreign and domestic militia groups. In order to study the Iraqi agency in manipulating Iraqi identity through violent tactics, I consulted various reports from the International Crisis
Group. In sum, I consulted a variety of sources in this chapter in the hope of constructing a well-rounded, unbiased narrative of one of the country’s most complicated periods of history and to present my argument regarding the political use of national and sectarian identities as a political tool from multiple angles.

**Goals for Contribution to the Field of Middle Eastern Studies and the History of Modern Iraq**

Many scholars have carefully researched the history of modern Iraq, playing close attention to important topics such as identity politics, violence, and state repression within the context of one specific period of time or government administration. The work of these academics has been essential to my own research and has greatly contributed to my own knowledge and understanding of Iraq’s precarious situation in the present day of political instability and deep-seated political and societal fragmentation, which has only been aggravated by the onset of communal violence following the US invasion and occupation in 2003. However, most of these studies focus on a particular regime or historical period when exploring these topics within the context of Iraq. By keeping a close focus on a few central themes over a large period of time, I believe that I have made an important contribution and uncovered long-term trends and developments that have received little attention. This thesis will trace the history of the use of Iraqi identity as a political tool of the state, explore how and when violence became the primary tool for hardening these identities as divisive political ones, and ask how these historical realities gave rise to the outbreak of communal violence in the contemporary period.
when the state collapsed under the weight of direct military intervention and flawed strategies of the U.S.-led military Coalition.
Chapter One

Imagining Iraq: The Origins of Politicized Ethno-religious Identities under the British Mandate
Introduction to the Mandate Era

The modern nation-state of Iraq, like many of its neighboring Middle Eastern countries, finds its roots in an artificial, haphazard creation by European imperialist powers, in this case Great Britain, as part of a mission to civilize the region and assert control over its natural resources. Following World War I, imperialist nations sought to control the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, but could not afford the system of direct colonial rule that has presided over subjects in India and Africa in the past centuries. Consequently, they created the Mandate system. Under this order, Britain and other European powers assumed control over regions including Iraq under the guise of preparing them for independence.\(^\text{10}\) As part of this new system, Britain assumed control over the three Ottoman provinces formerly known as the governorates Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, and began the arduous task of governing a people with which it had no cultural ties or national identity. They created an artificial state to serve their economic and political interests.\(^\text{11}\) Through the Mandate’s “empire by treaty”, the British granted Iraq a limited form of independence that permitted limited control over domestic affairs while still maintaining a military presence of British military, access to natural resources and control over foreign policy.\(^\text{12}\) In order to establish a new country based on a cohesive national identity, the British had to create a cohesive polity from the social landscape composed of approximately 50% Shia Arabs, 20% Sunnis, 20% Kurds, and 10% Christian and Jewish sects.\(^\text{13}\)

In order to accomplish the arduous task of constructing a state from only loosely associated provinces, the British established an administration in which one’s religious and ethnic identity determined accessibility to the state and legitimacy as an Iraqi citizen. In


particular, this system relied on British notions of Sunni superiority and assured this minority group a dominant seat in Iraqi politics. The unequal distribution of political power among the religious and ethnic groups was deliberately designed to fragment the people to avoid the emergence of a strong national identity that would challenge British authority. This is not to say that ethnic or religious conflict in Mesopotamia, particularly conflict between the Sunni and Shia sects of the population, did not exist prior to the British occupation. On the contrary, conflicts between these communities were historically well documented in numerous accounts of small-scale conflicts or episodes of violence. The principle change in ethnic and religious interactions from this state lies in the politicization of these previously social identities. In incorporating these identities into the political arena by giving citizens differential access to the state, the mandate system legitimized existing grievances and laid the groundwork for future organized, large-scale ethnic and religious violence in the name of the new Iraqi state.

In the early stages of the Mandate, British views of the indigenous population, namely their inability to govern themselves and their propensity for violence, shaped the creation of a new Iraqi government that would rely on religious and ethnic labels to determine power in politics. Between 1919 and 1920, the British Expedition Army noted that the Arabs had a propensity towards murder and theft, but could be corrected with the guiding hands of British officers.\(^\text{14}\) Regarding the people of the region, Gertrude Bell observed, “The Oriental is like a very old child...He is not practical in our acceptance of the world, any more than a child is practical, and his utility is not ours”.\(^\text{15}\) Like other British orientalists analyzing state formation in Iraq, Bell took on a paternalistic tone in her categorization of Mesopotamians and believed that the feat of statehood could not be achieved without the British, as the superior race, maintaining

\(^{14}\)Dodge, p. 23
\(^{15}\)Dodge, p. 64
control over the process. She continued, “Mesopotamia is not a civilized state, it is largely composed of wild tribes who do not wish to shoulder the burden and expense of citizenship”.\(^{16}\)

In this instance, Bell created an image of a population that would not take part in the task of state making not only because they were inferior, but lacked interest and willingly left this burden to the British. Such views were widespread among the British and later influenced the political structure of the new state.

British Justifications for the Mandate

While the justifications for the Mandate were many, one of the most prevalent is the view that the British were defending Mesopotamia from “the Turks” in the midst of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. In 1922, the Manchester Guardian published the following justification in London:

> The principle reason against evacuation is that it would immediately invite the return of the Turk. That is not a destiny we should desire for Irak, and its effects would extend at once to the other regions detached from Turkey by the war- to Syria, to Palestine, and so to Egypt. But if we do not withdraw from Irak, the alternative is to support her Government, although with as little interference and at as little cost as possible to ourselves, since her Government can certainly not stand alone.\(^{17}\)

This commentary suggests not only Britain’s perceptions of Iraqis, but also their intention to hold on their new informal empire, while keeping other imperial powers, such as France, from taking over the region. The British asserted that, since Iraqis were incapable of successfully governing the region and defending it against foreign invasion, they must remain in control lest Turkey returned to reclaim control over Mesopotamia. Furthermore, the periodical mentions the fear among imperialist nations that giving independence or loosening control over one area, such

---


\(^{17}\)The Manchester Guardian. Oct 12, 1922
as Iraq, would throw the whole region into chaos. This is particularly troubling for European powers vying for territories in the same region, such as Britain and France: not only did Britain want to block a possible Turkish threat, but also competition from other European countries.

A second way in which the British justified the Mandate was by asserting that they were performing a service for the Iraqis, who could not free themselves from Ottoman rule without being liberated by a colonial power. In 1917, Major General Stanley Maude assured the population in Baghdad that the British had not come as conquerors or enemies, but rather a liberating power for the Iraqi people.¹⁸ In this case, while notions of racial superiority are obvious, the British emphasized the portrayal of Iraqis as victims of the tyrannical Ottoman Empire and waiting for a superior power to liberate them.¹⁹ In the case, they made a key distinction regarding the subjugation of the indigenous population by a foreign power; if done by a non-European power, they were portrayed as brutish and evil, while if done by Europeans it was out of concern for the well being of the colonized people.²⁰

In order to complement their perspective as liberators, the British perceived the Iraqi population as grateful for their presence, as if the occupation was voluntary. In her letters to her family in London, Gertrude Bell wrote, “Baghdad is a mass of roses and congratulations. They are genuinely delighted to be free of the Turks”.²¹ The assumption that Iraqis welcomed British presence also served to remove blame or perception of injustice, as seen in the portrayal of the Turks. However, while documented Iraqi viewpoints on the British are hard to come by from this period, the few available examples show a difference between the actual Iraqi voices and those imagined by the British; these informants are also almost never identified by name. In an

---

¹⁸Simon, p. 23  
¹⁹Dodge, p. 44  
²⁰Dodge, p. 44  
²¹Bell, p. 406
interview with an Iraqi Bedouin woman, Gertrude Bell was confused by her perception of society under the British mandate. The woman challenged Bell by asking, “Ah! The rivers of tears, the floods of human misery that these waifs represent. What is life worth in this age of violence?” 22 Such commentary challenges the voices of British officials who insisted that Iraqis were enjoying a greater quality of life now that they had been freed from the Turks and were not governed by Great Britain. In fact, the quality of life for many Iraqis had diminished through this period of political instability. The difference between the British officers’ attitudes about their actions in Iraq as helping what they viewed as an inferior race in juxtaposition to brief quotes from the Iraqi people such as this mark a strong discord in viewpoints between the colonizers and the indigenous population that remains a theme throughout the Mandate period, and would manifest itself in the structuring of political identities in the new administration.

Centralizing Sunni Power

British authorities established the new Iraqi government fairly quickly and restructured identities of the region that now developed into legal categories in addition to constituting the traditional social association. In 1920, secular nationalists united with Shia tribesmen to overthrow what they collectively viewed as a British foreign occupation, rejecting the justifications presented by British officers and periodicals. This is not to romanticize the state of social tensions between the two religious divisions prior to British presence in the region; small-scale conflicts between Sunni and Shia groups were documented prior to this time period. However, the cooperation of these groups against the British demonstrated an ability to compromise, to work towards the establishment of an Iraqi state that transcended the boundaries

---

22 Bell, p. 438
drawn by religious or ethnic sect. While some Shia clerics were determined to construct a more Islamic government, this was not a consensus among Iraq’s Shia population. Despite evidence that the Shia population was willing to work with the new administration, the British determined that Iraq must be ruled by Sunnis, whom they viewed as more secular and more willing to accept the guidelines set forth by colonial powers. In particular, they favored an elite group of educated Sunnis whose families had previously worked with colonial powers and who could claim some sort of hereditary, aristocratic legitimacy among the Arab people. Therefore, the British chose Faisal, son of Sharif Hussein of the Hijaz, to become the first king of Iraq. With a new figurehead chosen, the Iraqi state was established in 1923.\textsuperscript{23} Constitutional Assembly elections took place the following year, resulting in an overwhelming political advantage for the Sunnis over the Shia.\textsuperscript{24} In 1925, the new administration passed the Organic Law, which declared Iraq a hereditary constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary assembly. Islam was declared the official religion, although Sharia courts only preside over personal status affairs; the government was left secular.\textsuperscript{25} In 1932, Iraq obtained formal independence and was admitted to the League of Nations; however, this technical independence did not end British interference in Iraqi affairs, and the colonial power still largely controlled the new monarchy as stated in the terms of the 1932 Anglo-Iraqi agreement.\textsuperscript{26}

The creation of a government controlled by Sunnis was a carefully selected strategy put in place after the British had deliberated several other options, including breaking the country into several states of similar ethnic and religious composition. The latter strategy proved unrealistic because no such homogeneous regions existed in Iraq. Diverse groups of the

\textsuperscript{23}Fontana, p. 12

\textsuperscript{24}Fontana, p. 12

\textsuperscript{25}Cleveland, p. 207

\textsuperscript{26}Cleveland, p. 208
population had coexisted before any foreign presence. Only after this strategy proved unrealistic did London decide to construct a Sunni Arab government.\textsuperscript{27} While a numerical minority in Iraq, the Sunnis had enjoyed an advantage over the rest of the population in terms of political power since Ottoman times, when they represented the educated elite of Baghdad. The British took this existing advantage during the Mandate era and cemented their previously existing advantage through false elections\textsuperscript{28} and through promoting only Sunni candidates from upper class backgrounds.\textsuperscript{29} Through promoting the rise of Sunni political power throughout this period, the colonial power created a system of differential access to the state based on previously existing social identities, which had now been further hardened and politicized.

The first step in cementing Sunni authority over the new Iraqi administration involved importing the British strategy used in India of creating a new class of the indigenous population to act as an intermediary body between the colonial power and the masses. Thomas Babington Macaulay of the East India Trade Company described this objective: “to create a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect”.\textsuperscript{30} Percy Cox, Gertrude Bell and other British representatives in Iraq engaged in this process by selecting Sunnis of an elite background to run a Western-style government that incorporated a few elements of Iraqi customs to bolster their legitimacy, while still allowing for the British to wield most of the political power\textsuperscript{31}. A.T. Wilson\textsuperscript{32} also noted in his memoirs that the most

\textsuperscript{27} Fontana, p. 4
\textsuperscript{28} While the British do organize an election for the new Iraqi head of state, citizens are limited to only one choice of candidate who wins the elections with 96\% of the vote despite discontent throughout the country
\textsuperscript{29} Cleveland, p. 205
\textsuperscript{32} A.T. Wilson is a British representative who spends the majority of his time in Iraq posted in Mosul to gather information about the population and their political opinions towards the new administration
successful way of fashioning the new Iraqi state was to organize political rule based on racial or
ethnic, rather than geographical or economic factors.\(^{33}\) When British powers were still supporting
Kurdish autonomy in Mosul, they selected Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji as head of the Kurdish
national movement, while Sunnis were appointed to positions of authority in Baghdad.\(^ {34}\)
Furthermore, the British believed that the Sunnis must constitute this new class because
incorporating the majority Shia population into the political decision-making process would lead
to a rejection of a secular government and the creation of a theocratic state.\(^ {35}\) This preference for
Sunni rulers showed that the British believed that the Shia were inferior due to unchangeable
differences in their thinking based on their religious background. Overall, in order to justify the
new administration, the British portrayed the Shia tribes as backwards and more simplistic than
Sunnis, who were in their view more willing to accept the new government approved and
controlled by Great Britain. They assumed that Shia disapproval of the new government was
based entirely on their preference for a theocracy and supposed religious inferiority and not the
fact that the British were establishing a government in which they were being marginalized.

The desire for a new Iraqi administration grounded in a specific ethnic and religious
identity, while the primary goal for the colonial power, did not enjoy the same popularity among
Iraqi citizens, even those granted limited participation in the process of nation building. One of
these few Iraqis given authority in this process was Jafar Pasha al-Askari. Jafar Pasha played an
essential role in the formation of the Iraqi state, serving as Minister of Defense and then serving
two terms as the country’s first prime minister.\(^ {36}\) Jafar was given access to the state due to his

\(^{33}\)Fontana, p. 3

\(^{34}\)Fontana, p. 2

\(^{35}\)Fontana, p. 8

experience as an officer during Ottoman rule, his Sunni background, and his willingness to cooperate with British authorities. Like the British, he observed and acknowledged existing social tensions among various social groups in Iraq, particularly between Sunni and Shia citizens. However, his strategy in addressing this issue diverged from that of the colonialists. In his memoirs, he realized the potential power of the state in shaping the social landscape of the country and sought to build a cohesive national identity based on multiple religions and ethnicities given equal participation. He protested the British strategy of giving differential access to the state and believed that the new administration should not discriminate against potential candidates based on sectarian identities.\textsuperscript{37} However, since Britain ultimately held authority over the Iraqi administration at this point in time, these strategies were not given consideration and disappear from the political discourse.

Faisal: the First King of Iraq

The choice of Faisal I as the first king of Iraq provides insight into British political strategy in Iraq and their perceptions of Iraqi preferences for the head of state. First, the move can be interpreted as an attempt by the British to mend relations with Husayn, emir of the Hijaz and his sons after an assortment of broken political promises made during the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence and afterwards.\textsuperscript{38} A popular figure in the Arab nationalist movement in Syria and originally chosen to become the king there, Faisal I was then removed from Damascus as the

\textsuperscript{37}Askari, p. 240

\textsuperscript{38} The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence (1915-1916) was a series of communication between British representatives and Hussein in which he was promised large portions of the failing Ottoman Empire in exchange for rallying the Arab population in his jurisdiction against the Ottomans. However, much of the same land was divided among the British and French during the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916. His sons Abdallah and Faisal are chosen as the heads of state of these newly formed countries to make up for this mistake.
French assumed control over Syria. In an attempt to make up for these botched political agreements, the British made Faisal the first king of Iraq, and his brother Abdullah assumed control over Transjordan. In addition, Faisal was seen as a good choice because the British sought to install someone as king who agreed to “reign but not govern”, thus ensuring that British interests would be protected while projecting the image of Iraqi independence and nationalism. Percy Cox, Gertrude Bell and other orientalists believed that his family heritage and Sunni legacy would appeal to the Sunni elite, while his reputation for religious tolerance would appease the majority Shia population.

Despite hopes that Faisal would serve as a tool for Iraqi nationalism due to his prestigious family background and Sunni heritage, the fact remained that Iraq received a foreigner to serve as the first king of a new monarchy orchestrated by European imperialists. There was little room in this system for Iraqi influence on this process, and this became apparent during the run-up to the elections. In order to promote the image of a democratic process in Iraq, British officers sent representatives out to Basra, Baghdad and Mosul to gather public opinion about potential candidates and to rally support around Faisal. However, when citizens asked about other candidates, these representatives had to admit that there were none. Reports refer to members of the public wishing to get rid of the Mandate altogether or to support a candidate who is not directly supported by the British as “extremists”, who were viewed with suspicion. In 1921, the

---

39 Fontana, p. 6
41 Fontana, p. 8
42 Fontana, p. 8
43 Sluglett, p. 38
British-controlled party unanimously nominated Faisal, who consequently won the plebiscite with a reported 96% of the vote.\textsuperscript{44}

Faisal’s image as an Iraqi nationalist was deeply compromised after the elections due to his lack of real political power. As noted in the \textit{Guardian} in 1922:

\begin{quote}
He is already not popular with some of his subjects, and the more he is thought to be a mere instrument in our hands, the more enemies he is certain to have. Especially will this be so if, at our instruction, he imposes taxation upon them in order, as seems to be intended, to repay us for the public utilities that we have handed over to him.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Here, the British realized that Faisal’s reputation as a tool for the colonialists is prohibiting a strong national identity and a feeling of true independence. While Percy Cox\textsuperscript{46} promoted an image of a more independent monarch in the country, he conceded very little power to Faisal and was often deeply suspicious of his ability to govern his own nation as an Arab ruler. On his inherent abilities to reason and successfully govern Iraq, Cox noted, “He has in recent episodes unmistakably displayed the cloven hoof. I have endeavored to be absolutely straightforward and frank with him, and to treat him like a brother, but there you are, when he is scratched deep enough the racial weakness displays itself”.\textsuperscript{47} Cox also intervened in events such as in 1922 when Faisal attempted to disagree with the British over a treaty, acting as ruler until such documents were signed and enacted.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, while his family background and Sunni status made him a more desirable ruler in the eyes of the British than a Shia, very little change in the way of self-governance materialized after Faisal’s election.

---

\textsuperscript{44}Sluglett, p. 44

\textsuperscript{45}The Guardian, 1922

\textsuperscript{46}Cox is the Chief Political Officer and Civil Commissioner throughout the Mandate period. He assumes power over the new administration, particularly when Faisal’s opinions regarding governance conflict with his own. Townsend, p. 91

\textsuperscript{47}Dodge, p. 65

\textsuperscript{48}Dodge, p. 66
Faisal’s own thoughts regarding the status of Iraq at this time showed a concern over a lack of national identity and an inability to exercise independence from the British. His position as ruler over Iraq was frustrating to him. He needed to cooperate with the British in order to have any power in the construction of the Iraqi state, but doing so alienated him from the Iraqi people and forced him to abandon his own goals for the country. In a letter to Prime Minister Jafar Pasha, he expressed his concerns over the new state:

It is true that we set out to achieve more, but what more can we do now? … I am only sorry that our people, in their ignorance of how hard we have had to fight, have opposed rather than supported us. We stood our ground and how we are on our way home, and although we did not obtain “complete independence”, we did manage to achieve an honorable compromise. Nobody can blame us for having done our utmost.49

It is important to note his frustration over having so little power to challenge British interests. The concern expressed in his correspondence showed that he was not an apathetic bystander to the colonial power controlling Iraq, but that he attempted to use his privileged status to achieve a watered-down compromise with the British for lack of a better option. In regards to the lack of a cohesive identity in Iraq, he observed,

In this regard and with my heart filled with sadness, I have to say that it is my belief that there is no Iraqi people inside Iraq. There are only diverse groups with no national sentiments. They are filled with superstitions and false religious traditions with no common grounds between them…It is our responsibility to form out of this mass one people that we would then guide, train and educate.50

Faisal revealed a deep concern over the lack of an identity and a worry that societal rifts already present in the three provinces would become hardened and fragmented without a large effort on the part of the state to unify all religions and ethnicities under a national identity.

49Askari, p. 235

Ramifications for the Shia under the New Administration

The political marginalization of the majority Shia population was another central theme in the new Iraqi administration. Viewed as backwards and adverse to a democratic system in Iraq, the Shia were given little opportunity to participate in the new administration from its inception. British representatives at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, determined to legitimize their choice of favoring Sunni elite power in the new government, refused to acknowledge that the majority of Iraq was Shia.\textsuperscript{51} Instead, they painted a picture of a country largely populated by Sunnis and plagued by minority Shia population staunchly refusing to consent to British rule. This prejudice was further politicized in 1924 when administration passed a law defining and categorizing Iraqi citizenship. Under this law, government officials defined a specific category of citizens, “Iraqis of Iranian origin”, and added this label to their identification cards. By including this label on official documents, the government was able to discriminate against these citizens due to their origins and legitimizes inferiority at the state level.\textsuperscript{52}

British discourse concerning the Shia during the mandate period revealed their assumption that religious difference was a divisive factor and should prohibit the Shia community from exercising political power in the new regime. Gertrude Bell described these citizens as “more Islamic” than their Sunni counterparts.\textsuperscript{53} This concept challenged traditional categorization of Islamic sects, which usually considered Sunnism to be the more orthodox party. In Bell’s case, the “Islamic” denotes a stronger association with a more extremist adherence to religious values and a way of thinking that she saw as both inferior and incompatible with the

\textsuperscript{51}Fontana, p. 5
\textsuperscript{52} Louer, Laurence. Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. p. 87
\textsuperscript{53}Dodge, p. 67
British-controlled government. While taking advantage of existing tribal ties to control rural areas, the more powerful individuals of the Shia community were left out of the political discourse in Baghdad. Bell expressed her contempt for these leaders in the following passage:

> It’s a problem here how to get in touch with the Shias, not the tribal people in the country; we’re on intimate terms with all of them, but the grimly devout citizens of the holy towns and more especially the leaders of the religious opinion, the Mujtahids, who can loose the bind with a word by authority which rests on the intimate acquaintance with accumulated knowledge entirely irrelevant to human affairs and worthless in any branch of human activity. There they sit in an atmosphere which reeks of antiquity and is so thick with the dust of ages that you can’t see through it- nor can they.\(^{54}\)

Here, Bell created an image of the Shia leadership so steeped in ancient traditions that they are impermeable to the reasoning of the modern era. She reinforced this notion by frequently referring to them as “extremists” in her letters. The word choice used in describing Shia clerics and other leaders of the Shia community had lasting effects in terms of political representation and social notions of the group.

Angered by a foreign occupation that intentionally marginalized their community, the Shia organized a revolt against British rule in 1920 and then in 1922 in response to the new treaty. Some Shia wished to install an Islamic republic, however the main point of protest for the majority of the community was foreign rule.\(^{55}\) For example, political activist Muhammad Al-Sadr founded Haras al-Istiqlal, a nationalist party aimed at uniting the sects in Iraq to promote a cohesive national identity and administration.\(^{56}\) While the assertion that all Shia rejected all forms of government except for an Islamic republic was therefore inaccurate, this fact was eclipsed by the mounting British tension against the Shia after this rebellion, even after officers were able to stabilize the region. After this display of antagonism towards British rule, Percy

---

\(^{54}\)Bell, p. 483

\(^{55}\)Fontana, p. 11

Cox intentionally kept the Shia out of negotiations towards the 1922 treaty in attempt to “clip their wings”. Moreover, the Shia were further marginalized after the revolt, and the causes for such a rebellion, including legitimate Shia grievances over a lack of power, were dismissed. Bell responded to the revolt with the following: “The unthinking people who form the great mass of the world, follow suit in a blind revolt against an accepted order”. She argued that the revolts had no legitimacy because they were led by anti-British extremists. She therefore discredited the concerns of the Shia masses of being left out of the political discourse and eliminated the possibility of negotiation for a more equal political representation during this period.

After 1920, the British executed harsh punishment against Shia members of the population who tried to rebel against the administration. In June of 1923, the son of Grand Mujtahid Mahdi al-Khalisi was arrested for attaching a fatwa on a door to a mosque, in which he called for businesses at the local bazaar to close in protest of the British-controlled government. Authorities quickly responded by deporting him and three members of his family to Persia, while other Shia leaders followed in protest. The tactic of revoking one’s citizenship as punishment for political dissent reveals the lack of choice Iraqis had in accepting British control and favored a strong hold over the region over a concern for national unity. By eliminating dissenters, the British administration was able to eliminate dissent without incorporating the Shia into the national political landscape.

However damaging to the future of political unity in Iraq, the strategy of deporting political dissidents proved to be effective in terms of quelling rebellion. In November of 1923, Shia leaders still in exile in Persia issued a statement to king Faisal I stating that they were

---

57 Fontana, p. 8  
58 Bell, p. 498  
59 Fontana, p. 11  
60 Fontana, p. 11
mistaken in their actions and that, while they wanted greater Shia representation in the government, they consented to the Sunni-dominated administration if they were allowed back into Iraq. They were permitted to return from exile, but not before withdrawing all fatwas against the British and agreeing to refrain from all political activity. Therefore, the Shia were left with less political voice after 1923 and even less bargaining power.

The primary issue in the treatment of the Shia community in these early years of the mandate was the blatant denial of their majority status in Iraq along with the assertion that their religious beliefs constituted an inherent incompatibility with the semi-democratic institution that the British installed. For example, Cornwallis, advisor to the Ministry of the Interior categorized the Shia as follows: “Their religious beliefs alone prevent them from countenancing the Iraqi government and I believe that when they set out from Karbala’ the other day they would have raised a rebellion had they had any encouragement”. This categorization ignored the fact that the Shia in Iraq had previously lived in mixed communities and that they had legitimate reasons for opposing the new government. They were purposefully marginalized by the British, who put Sunnis in power while they exiled Shia leaders. British authorities harshly reprimanded the Shia for revolting against the new government, but unlike the Sunni community, they were given no incentive to support it. Rather, the British chastised the Shia for rejecting the new state while treating them in a manner that ensured that they would. By emphasizing their religion as a divisive factor, the British actively fragmented Iraqi politics and by association, Iraqi society.

The Kurds: a Challenge to the New Nation

---

61Fontana, p. 12

62Sluglett, p. 56
Unlike the Shia, who were involuntarily kept from being fully incorporated and represented in the new Iraqi state, the Kurds actively sought an independent state for themselves, yet were forced to become part of Iraq. In this situation, the Kurds represented an opposition to a new Iraqi national identity. The origins of Kurdish disinterest in becoming part of Iraq stemmed from Britain’s broken political promises to the people of Mosul. While the British originally supported an autonomous state, they later changed their strategy and decided to incorporate Mosul into Iraq, largely because they sought to profit from natural resources, including suspected oil deposits in the region.\(^6^3\) In addition, the Kurds were incorporated into the new state due to their Sunni identity, allowing for increase in the percentage of Sunnis in Iraq to counteract the Shia majority.\(^6^4\) The Treaty of Sevres, which dismantled the Ottoman Empire in 1920, also included a clause for an independent Kurdish state; however, this was never enforced.\(^6^5\) The Kurds, angered over this injustice, were reluctant to join Iraq and did not forget the unfulfilled promises of the Treaty of Sevres.

The incorporation of Mosul began with British officers and members of the League of Nations sending representatives to the region to gather information about the population and their attitudes about the evolving socio-political situation of the Mandate era. Prior to visiting the region, these representatives assumed that the residents of Mosul would want to be divided along ethnic lines, despite the fact that these communities had been mixed for centuries.\(^6^6\) Commissioners were confused after interviewing a population more concerned with economic, historical and political issues than ethnic or religious ones. They also noted that identities could

\(^{6^3}\)Fontana, p. 11


\(^{6^5}\)Simon, p. 100

\(^{6^6}\)Simon, p. 55
be rather fluid; some residents switched their identity from Turk to Arab with the fall of Ottoman power.\textsuperscript{67} Wallace Lyon, who spent the majority of his career with the British government in the Kurdish region, also reported that it was composed of a variety of ethnicities, cultures and languages.\textsuperscript{68} While small-scale conflicts existed, this lack of cohesion did not cause any great unrest or uprising.

While the British were careful to promote the image of democracy in Iraq by sending surveys out to the Kurdish population, their opinions were often not represented in the government. During Faisal’s candidacy, Lyon surveyed various parts of the region regarding their opinions on the matter. He wrote, “They were reluctant and asked about other candidates; and I was compelled to admit there was none”.\textsuperscript{69} As with the Shia, Kurdish opinion did not materialize into any kind of social or political change, or an introduction of more than one candidate into the election. Overall, the northern region of Iraq was dissatisfied with the election because some areas had not been consulted while others had outright rejected Faisal.\textsuperscript{70}

The Kurdish community, disappointed with Faisal’s election and frustrated over broken agreements over Kurdish autonomy, resisted the moves to make their homeland part of Iraq in various pockets of the region, including Suleiman.\textsuperscript{71} To show that separatist movements would not be tolerated, British officer Dobbs bombed the region and put an end to these movements.\textsuperscript{72} As seen in the Shia revolts, the British did not hesitate to use violence in order to hold the new nation together. However, large-scale violent civilian movements were not yet present at this point.

\textsuperscript{67}Simon, p. 55
\textsuperscript{68}Lyon, p. 34
\textsuperscript{69}Lyon, p. 95
\textsuperscript{70}Lyon, p. 107
\textsuperscript{71}Fontana, p. 10
\textsuperscript{72}Fontana, p. 10
point in Iraq’s history. Overall, many of the problems of incorporating the Kurds into a cohesive Iraqi identity and the political landscape of Iraq stemmed from inconsistency. Britain’s initial support for an independent Kurdistan left the population of this region with little motive to want to become part of Iraq in the period from 1918 to 1921.

Iraqi members of the administration, while having little power to express their own opinions or strategies beyond the scope of what was approved by the British, differed in their opinions on how to deal with the incorporation of Mosul into the Iraqi state. Jafar Pasha, acknowledging the lack of a cohesive state identity, noted that no one had set forth a policy or program to help unite Arabs and Kurds under the new state since its inception.\(^{73}\) Also absent was such a program to incorporate the marginalized Shia. While the British did use force to quell revolts directly against their authority, encouraging a strong national identity based on a unification of these religious and ethnic sects did not serve their interests because it was easier to manage a fragmented region that was less likely to rebel as a unified body. Fearing further fragmentation of the country’s society, Jafar Pasha stressed the need to make the Kurds feel as if they were part of the nation and not an excluded community. One way to encourage this sentiment was to move some government facilities to the Kurdish region and to employ more Kurds in the process. He suggested a policy to encourage Iraq’s ethnic groups to move to different regions of the country and to intermarry.\(^{74}\) While it is difficult to evaluate the success of such programs since they were never enacted, it shows an Iraqi’s knowledge of a current social tension and an awareness that further politicization of these identities will lead to a more hardened perception of differences and more problems of fragmentation for the Iraqi people.

\(^{73}\)Askari, p. 238

\(^{74}\)Askari, p. 238
Strategies for Constructing a National Identity

After the establishment of the monarchy, various strategies for the construction of a strong national identity began to take shape. For the British, the preferred strategy was to contrive a strong identity that leads citizens to identify themselves as Iraqi, but not challenge the foreign-controlled government. Conceptually, this is difficult to maintain because a truly independent nation would naturally seek to control its own administration and resources and sever ties with an imperialist power. In 1922 the *London Times* noted: “No common purpose yet animates these heterogeneous communities... (yet) Mesopotamia, with its vague frontiers and mixed population, was treated as a nation, as an embryo State, to be ranked with the modern democracies included under the League of Nations.”

Therefore, among the various interpretations of an Iraqi nationalist identity presented among in the political discourse of this era, the British propagated a particular brand of this notion that ensures dependency on the foreign power.

In what is seen by prominent historians as a missed opportunity to create a cohesive notion of Iraqi identity across ethnic and religious sects, Bell and others in charge of building the state legitimized existing social grievances by introducing this wrinkle in the Iraqi social fabric into the political arena. This incorporation was seen as early as the 1920 revolt when Bell observed Shia and Sunni sects attending *mawlids*, services to celebrate the birth of the prophet on the same day and some times at the same service. Present on this particular year were mutual political and religious speeches aimed at uniting Iraq and expelling the British occupiers. In

---

75Fontana, p. 13
76Rohde, p. 60
77Lukitz, p. 132
secondary sources as well as her own letters, Gertrude always treated the discovery of integrated regions and tribes, or any ambivalent attitudes towards ethnic or religious homogeneity with shock and surprise.\textsuperscript{78} In this situation, the British occupation actually served as a positive force in constructing a national identity by providing a common enemy to unite Iraqi citizens. The British, aware and perplexed by this phenomenon, continued to assert that there was a dangerous lack of a cohesive identity among the Iraqis and that foreign powers must continue to retain control over the region to avoid their own expulsion from the country.

Contrary to the image of Iraqi nationalism, or lack thereof, painted in the \textit{Times} article cited above, organic movements towards a cohesive national identity were forming in Iraq during this time. The main issue for these movements was that they promoted total independence and therefore lacked a voice in the British-controlled administration. One varying opinion regarding national identity within the administration, however absent in the manifestation of the law in the state, was that of Jafar Pasha. While he agreed that there was a problem in Iraq concerning a new national identity, he differed from his British counterparts in terms of its origins and possible solutions. He acknowledged existing cleavages within the Iraqi social landscape as being a domestic issue, but also pointed to the exaggeration of these cleavages and their incorporation into the state as the result of the failure of the new administration to address them in a proper manner. He wrote,

\begin{quote}
The current situation in our country demands urgent action. We must find ways to create a unified Iraq with an ideology of Iraqi nationhood, and bring Iraqi society in line with the modern world...If we pay no attention to our social fragmentation, how can we hope to ever establish a greater Iraqi society based on a single national ideology and a common national goal?\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{78}Lukitz 118
\textsuperscript{79}Askari, p. 237
As part of the solution to a lack of Iraqi national identity, Jafar Pasha advocated promoting nationalism and patriotism in schools based on unity devoid of sectarianism.  

Two of the most popular concepts among Iraqi nationals to encourage unity were Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism. Within the country, the concept of Arabism was to forge a common identity among the Iraqi people. The term was also used by some officials, such as Jafar Pasha, to apply to the Kurds and other minority groups by referring to them as Arab in an effort to create a sense of commonality throughout Iraq. In a wider sense, pan-Arabism inspired a sense of unity among Arab nations and their grievances against foreign rule. While very popular among Iraqis for its stress on unification over regionalism or sectarianism as propagated by the state, this concept proved to be a difficult one for the British to reconcile with its Iraqi subjects. On one hand, they feared that a feeling of unity throughout Arab nations would inspire the population to revolt against colonial powers. On the other, within the borders of Iraq, the movement was popular among different strata of society and presented multiple groups as legitimate members of the state. Therefore, the British were both fearful and intolerant of pan-Arabism, but risked angering the Iraqi population by outwardly admitting this and therefore exhibited a limited, if not outright false, form of tolerance.

Apart from direct participants in the political administration such as Jafar Pasha and Faisal, other prominent Iraqi thinkers of this time actively promoted a form of Iraqi nationalism and unity absent in Britain’s political discourse in the region. One such thinker is ‘Abd al-Fatah Ibrahim. Born in 1906 and educated at the American University of Beirut and Columbia University, Ibrahim was a prominent Iraqi scholar during the 1930’s as the new nation searched

---

80 Askari, p. 237
81 Rohde, p. 18
for a concept of unity to form a strong sense of nationalism. He noted that nationalism, due to its powerful nature, can be a constructive or destructive force: if citizens are made to feel that they have a stake in the decision-making process of the country, they are likely to feel a collective consciousness with the rest of the population. Unlike many ideas being propagated by the colonial power during this time, Ibrahim argued that a common ethnicity is not necessary to forge a strong sense of commonality, as many nations are a compilation of backgrounds (the United States, for example) had formed a strong national identity despite existing social cleavages.

Britain’s exercise of power in quashing the pan-Arab movement was seen primarily in its rejection of Faisal’s movements towards unity with other Arab leaders. In 1932, Faisal I engaged in talks with Arab nations and wanted to hold a conference in Baghdad with their representatives, but Britain feared they would discuss politically sensitive topics like Palestine and Syria that could potentially endanger colonialist power in the region and denied his request. Four years later, Faisal and rulers in Saudi Arabia initiate a treaty to protect Arab interests in Palestine and Syria, but he was pressured once again to end these discussions. Thus, while popular concept among Iraqi citizens and viewed as a possible solution to the lack of a cohesive identity, pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism were difficult to promote in the foreign-controlled administration.

Conclusion

---

82 Rohde, p. 107
83 Silverfarb, p. 59
84 Silverfarb, p. 59
The government installed by the British during the Mandate period, while short-lived, set the precedent for politicizing ethnic and religious identities in Iraq and giving citizens different rights and privileges based on these identities at the state level. From 1936 to 1941, the young nation was thrown into turmoil by a series of military coups, but then enjoyed relative stability until a military coup in 1958 officially ended the British-installed monarchy.\textsuperscript{85} While the coup defeated the monarchy, it did not erase the hardened and politicized ethnic and religious identities that have become an unfortunate component of Iraqi society up until present day. Throughout the Mandate period, these identities were stressed and seen as such an essential aspect of state and individual relations that the ethnic conflict seen in later periods becomes inevitable. In addition, while ethnic and religious cohesion as a national identity failed during this period due to the complex and diverse mosaic of Iraqi society, there was no alternative that successfully glued the nation together by the fall of the monarchy, resulting in a weak and fragile state. At the close of the Mandate era, several contributing factors to ethnic sectarian violence, such as politicized identities and institutionalized discrimination, were already well embedded into Iraqi society. The Mandate period, however, could not alone be isolated as the cause of such conflicts seen in more contemporary periods of the nation’s history as violence remained a largely untapped tool of interaction between the state and specific communities within the Iraqi population.

\textsuperscript{85} Cleveland, p. 211
Chapter Two

The Politics of Violence: State-sponsored Religious and Ethnic Violence under the Dictatorship of Saddam Hussein
Introduction: from the Mandate to Saddam’s Dictatorship

The British Mandate era was not only a failure in terms of constructing a unified Iraqi state and a stable government, but also left a long-standing legacy of strained interactions between the state and Iraqi citizens based on their religious or ethnic background. In terms of structure, the administration left by the British quickly unraveled and exposed the nation to a series of unstable and short-lived regimes. The monarchy officially came to an end in the 1958 coup d’état led by ‘Abd al Karim Qasim, who ruled until the Ba’ath Party takeover in 1963. Although this administration lasted only a few years, the break from a foreign-installed monarchy and establishment of an independent Iraqi government symbolized the end of imperialist rule, a significant step in promoting the construction of national identity, and therefore remained an important period in Iraq’s history. From Qasim’s administration to the Ba’ath party takeover in 1963 and Saddam’s rise to power in 1979, the Iraqi government was transformed into a secular, nationalist republic that claimed to treat all Iraqi citizens equally.

Despite a complete restructuring after the British Mandate, later administrations continued to show unequal treatment when interacting with various parts of Iraq’s diverse population and further contributed to the legacy of inequality among ethnic and religious groups.

This chapter focuses on the interactions between the state and its citizens of various religious and ethnic backgrounds during Saddam Hussein’s rule from 1979 to 2003. The focus on Saddam Hussein’s regime provides a strong example of how Iraqis of varied backgrounds were treated throughout this long-term arguably stable administration. In addition, this period

---


88 Woods, p. 113
provides a useful point of comparison with the Mandate Era due to the influence of foreign players on the construction of communal identities, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War and the First Gulf War. Throughout his rule, Saddam Hussein exploited existing tensions between the state and civilians of varying ethnic and religious backgrounds cultivated under the Mandate Era through two main strategies: the manipulation of nationalist discourse and the use of large-scale violence against civilians in order to maintain control over the nation. By portraying individuals of different ethnic and sectarian identities as the “other group” during times of instability and foreign intervention, Hussein sought to delegitimize the population’s grievances against the regime and reassert his own claim to power. Moreover, he forced these groups into submission through the powerful tool of violence, including acts of genocide, torture and execution.

The Rise of Saddam Hussein

Saddam Hussein began his political career in Iraq through family connections in the Ba’ath Party, and was an active member of the Party well before his presidency. Hussein was born on April 28th, 1937 into a very poor family in al-Auja, near Tikrit. His father died when he was a child and both his mother and stepfather were illiterate and lived in poverty. He wanted to enter the Iraqi military as a way out of poverty, but his lack of social standing and family connections kept him from being admitted to the Baghdad Military Academy. In need of an alternative career path, Hussein joined the Ba’ath Party in 1959 by utilizing connections established in the party through his stepfather’s family and worked within the Party’s security apparatus. In 1963, he dropped out of school to marry his cousin Sajida Tulfah and made his

89 Mackey, p. 207
90 Mackey p. 208
work with the Ba’ath Party a full time career. At this time, Hussein’s uncle al-Bakr was technically president of the party, but he had already begun to amass a great deal of political power. In 1968, current president Abd al-Rahman was forced to resign, and Saddam Hussein assumed the position of vice president.

Hussein significantly altered Iraq’s political landscape in 1979 when he became president of the Ba’ath Party and commander-in-chief of Iraqi armed forces. He established his position of complete authority and exercised the use of fear for purposes of political manipulation almost immediately with what is known as “The Night of Long Knives”. During a party assembly shortly after his inauguration as president, Hussein called out the names of twenty-one party members, accused them of being traitors to Iraq by colluding with Syria, and sent them before the firing squad. He also invited other members of the party to show their loyalty by taking part in the executions. He quickly took several more measures to concentrate political power completely in his own hands. First, he eliminated all Ba’ath Party rhetoric that called Iraq a “popular democracy” that had been popular throughout the 1960’s. On the surface, this decision seems to merely reflect a change in semantics without having any palpable impact on society. However, removing all mention of democracy reflects his consolidation power and any political voice from the Iraqi population. Then, he elevated his family members, including his half-brothers Barzan, Watban, and Saba’awi, his step-father Ibrahim Hasan al-Majid, and his cousin ‘Ali Hasan al-Majid, to important positions of power within his administration. By placing close family members in these positions, Hussein believed that he could exclude his

---

91 Mackey, p. 209
92 Mackey, p. 210
93 Mackey, p. 193
94 Mackey, p. 235
95 Mackey, p. 236
96 Davis, p. 170
enemies from power and remove the possibility of internal dissent. In effect, he removed any possibility for other politicians to compromise his absolute power in the government as well as the military. Without question, Hussein wasted no time in establishing fear, violence and consolidation of family power as political tools to maintain complete control over Iraq from the very beginning of his presidency. Hussein’s position on Pan-Arabism, while officially emphasized in his speeches as a keystone of Iraqi identity, in reality was almost always dismissed in favor of Iraqi nationalism and a distrust of foreign regimes. He refused to negotiate with al-Assad, the president of Syria, and instead aimed to construct an identity that was uniquely Iraqi and was not influenced by other states.97

Like earlier heads of administration in Iraq, Hussein recognized the political power of the concept of national identity and manipulated it in order to achieve his own political goals. One of his most powerful strategies was the complete alignment of national identity with state identity. The Ba’ath Party had used these tactics before, but Hussein promoted a personality cult as the official face of Iraqi national identity. Therefore, any political disagreement with Saddam or his administration became an attack on the entire nation, and citizens expressing this disagreement were viewed as a target to be removed.98 The minister of industry presented Hussein to the Iraqi people as “the symbol of the Iraqi’s pride and the fluttering flag of the nation…the hope living in the conscience of every Arab.”99 General Hamadi also noted the strong connection between Saddam Hussein and the national identity of every Iraqi, articulating the cult surrounding Saddam’s personality as follows: “Saddam. Saddam was the concentration of everything. Sometimes you would feel so close to him and other times you felt you were in a cage with a

97 Mackey, p. 253
99 Dawisha, p. 557
hungry lion”.100 His fear of Hussein’s unpredictable moods showed that even members of his own administration could become targets of his brutal violence if they displayed any sense of disloyalty or disapproval. Hussein’s birthday was declared a national holiday, and in 1982 the National Assembly was instructed to write a pledge of loyalty in blood.101 All state employees, including teachers, were forced to join the Ba’ath Party and were fired if they refused.102 Hussein’s aggressive cult of personality and the feeling of fear he inspired worked well for his political career: he ran unopposed throughout his presidency and consistently won 100% of the votes in the nation’s obviously rigged elections.103

History of the Ba’ath Party

Saddam Hussein began his political career through his involvement in the Ba’ath Party, which finds its roots not in Iraq, but in nationalist projects in Syria. The Ba’ath Party was founded in the 1940’s in Syria by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar under the banner of Arab socialism and revolution.104 Clause 6 of the official Permanent Principles of the party stresses its nationalist and revolutionary focus: “The Ba’ath is a revolutionary party. It believes that its principle aims in realizing an Arab national renaissance and of building socialism will not be attained except by revolution and struggle”.105

This focus on revolution proved to be popular in Iraq when the Ba’ath Party was established there in 1958. Another important aspect of the Party’s focus was Pan-Arabism,
program for unifying the many nations in the Middle East that had been artificially created and then subjected to foreign rule. In order to emphasize this point, party founder Aflaq coined the term “Arab socialism” to assure that it was perceived as an organic movement and not associated with any foreign powers.106 The emphasis on an Arab commonality was a way to move past the region’s colonial past and reclaim its own concept of identity, especially since Pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism had been denounced by European rulers during the Mandate Era. The Party slogan of “unity, freedom, and socialism” was used both to emphasize Pan-Arabism, and to promote a cohesive Iraqi national identity.107 Apart from nationalist discourse, the Ba’ath Party became popular through several projects aimed at developing Iraq’s economic and social sphere.108 For example, the National Development Plan proposed in 1974-1975 outlined the Ba’ath Party’s main objectives for Iraq, such as diversifying the economy to lessen the country’s dependence on oil, increasing social services, and expanding opportunities for employment across diverse socio-economic strata.109

Nevertheless, many of the Ba’ath Party’s policies were flawed. For example, Party members stressed Socialism and Republicanism in official discourse, but did little to put this rhetoric into action. The Ba’ath party was consistently critical of Western democracies in order to emphasize their independence from colonial powers, and claimed that theirs was the truest version of democracy worldwide.110 However, most of the key components of a democracy, including free and fair elections, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech were absent under...

106 Bengio, p. 40
107 Bengio, p. 37
110 Bengio, p. 60
Ba’ath Party rule.\textsuperscript{111} General Raad Hamadi, a former Ba’ath party member who commanded the Second Republican Guard Corps until the American Occupation in 2003, noted these inconsistencies from his experiences. He described the Ba’ath party as similar to communist parties: the rhetoric pertaining to equality and unity was admirable but often failed to materialize.\textsuperscript{112} In addition, one obvious contradiction in the Party’s emphasis on Pan-Arab unity was the division between the Syrian and Iraqi Ba’ath parties. The two branches began to drift apart once the Party gained power in Iraq, and in 1966 saw more internal divisions when the Syrian wing purged the party of intellectuals, including its founder, Michael Aflaq. Iraqi Ba’ath Party members, concerned that Syria would try to invade Iraq to establish a unified state, reinstated Aflaq within their own branch of the Party to separate themselves from Syrian politics.\textsuperscript{113} The conceptual inconsistency of having two Pan-Arab groups in the same party that were unwilling to work together revealed that, despite lofty theories of unity, these same politicians were uninterested in putting such ideals into practice. Despite claims to Pan-Arabism, the Iraqi Ba’ath party was by all accounts an Iraqi nationalist one.\textsuperscript{114}

With regard to promoting a cohesive national identity, Ba’ath Party promoted itself as an essential dimension of Iraqi culture and identity in order to keep itself in power and emphasize its legitimacy. This politicized identification of party politics with national identity, known as the “Ba’athization” of Iraq, lasted for roughly a decade after the party’s establishment in Iraq and emphasized that the terms “Ba’athi” and “Iraqi” were one in the same\textsuperscript{115}. During this campaign, Ba’ath party members were seen as models of Iraqi nationalism and patriotism.\textsuperscript{116} Therefore,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{111} Bengio, p. 61 \\
\textsuperscript{112} Steavonson, p. 61 \\
\textsuperscript{113} Mackey, p. 211 \\
\textsuperscript{114} Mackey, p. 230 \\
\textsuperscript{115} Bengio, p. 48 \\
\textsuperscript{116} Bengio, p. 89
\end{flushright}
being Iraqi under this regime meant pledging loyalty to the Ba’ath Party above all other loyalties, including those to local culture, religion, or ethnic group.\textsuperscript{117}

Due to the Party’s stress on unity, it officially denounced sectarianism and ethnic tensions as relics of colonialism that had no place in independent, modern Arab states.\textsuperscript{118} In addition, tribes were also denounced as backward because they violated the concept of unity by emphasizing loyalty to a smaller unit than the nation or the Ba’ath party\textsuperscript{119}. However, there were issues within the structure and practices of the Party that contradicted its official stance of equality and unity. For example, there were three main factions within the Party, each with varying sectarian composition and political ideologies. Shia citizens largely belonged to the leftist wing of the party, and advocated a rapid shift to a socialist state. The rightist group was composed of people of mixed religious backgrounds and advocated a more gradual shift to socialism with the cooperation of the military and Iraqi nationalists. The third group, headed by General al-Bakr, sought to maintain the Sunni stronghold on the nation’s political power established in the Mandate Era.\textsuperscript{120} Therefore, once al-Bakr’s group became more powerful in Iraq’s political arena, there was a clear advantage to being Sunni.

The Ba’ath Party’s policy towards religion and politics remained strictly secular throughout the 1970s and made no references to religion in political discourse. This position was integral to the Party’s nationalist identity and, in theory, would ensure equality among all religious groups in relationship to the state. However, the Ba’ath Party’s methods of enforcing this secular identity often had unintended consequences or reflected an undercurrent of prejudice towards specific groups. In the 1970s the Party banned Shia religious observances, which led to

\textsuperscript{117} Bengio, p. 91
\textsuperscript{118} Mackey, p. 206
\textsuperscript{119} Mackey, p. 206
\textsuperscript{120} Mackey, p. 192
riots in Najaf and Karbala. These actions directly contradicted the Party’s rhetoric about equality among citizens and oppressed the rights of a specific religious community, in this case towards the Shia majority.

Dimensions of Iraqi Identity under Saddam Hussein

While loyalty to Saddam was characterized as the most vital piece of Iraqi national identity throughout his presidency, the dictator also introduced several other critical dimensions of this identity, many of which had negative ramifications for Iraq’s various ethnic and religious groups. First, Hussein emphasized the Arab dimension of Iraqi identity and deeply mistrusted anyone of non-Arab origins. He barred all ethnic Persians from being candidates for high government positions, asserting that all candidates must be the offspring of an Iraqi father and an Arab mother. With this decision, Hussein barred a significant portion of the population that was of (partial) Iranian ancestry, even if such people had lived in Iraq for generations, from access to a career with his administration. In particular, this affected many Shia citizens: by barring non-Arab citizens from being able to run as candidates, Hussein created negative consequences for many Shia citizens in Iraq. In theory, this also directly contradicted the Ba’ath party rhetoric that sectarianism was an unfortunate relic of colonialism and had no place in modern Iraqi society.

Hussein’s policies towards different and religious groups were often contradictory. Although he excluded Iraqis of alleged Iranian origin from full citizenship by denying them equal access to the state, he utilized lofty Ba’athi rhetoric of unity towards Iraq’s Kurdish

---

121 Woods, p. 84
122 Mackey, p. 238
population. In 1979, the dictator stated. “There is no contradiction between the Kurdishness of the Kurd and his being part of the Arab nation”. He also ethnically linked the Kurds to Arab Iraqis through common historical ties dating back to the Assyrians and Babylonians. In this case, the “Arab” dimension of Iraqi identity was used as a fluid concept to apply to all Iraqis as a unifying factor. However, when referring to citizens of Persian origin, ethnicity became a rigid and exclusive component of national identity. This inconsistency revealed that Hussein was well aware of the power of using group identity as a political tool. In addition, he directly contradicted his previous speeches stressing unity between Kurdish and Arab identities and focused on ethnicity to marginalize Iraqi Kurds, particularly during the most violent years of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. During this same time period, he enforced more exclusionary measures towards the Shia population to reflect his strained political relationship with Iran. In alignment with these policies, both Shia and Kurds were largely excluded during the government expansion throughout the 1980s, despite Hussein’s emphasis on unity in his political speeches.

Hussein’s contradictory behavior towards religious and ethnic groups also became obvious through political discourse. He stressed that he distrusted those who mixed religion with politics, in concordance with the Ba’ath Party’s publically secular identity. In order to stress the secular nature of his administration and provide a negative example of mixing religion in politics in Iraq’s history, he noted how the Ottomans used their Sunni Muslim identity as a means of claiming legitimacy for their rule over Iraq. In response to religious parties or those who claimed political legitimacy through their religious background, Saddam noted, “By God, I do not like them, I do not like those who work politics under the guise of religion. My trust in them

123 Mackey, p. 239
124 Mackey, p. 239
126 Woods, p. 112
Throughout his rule, Hussein portrayed the Shia majority as religious zealots who were a threat to the secular nature of the state and the nation’s identity. Prior to Hussein’s presidency, the Ba’ath Party referred to the Shia community as *ta’ifa* (community, sect), or *ta’ifiyya* (sectarianism). Originally, these words were used as fairly neutral terms. However, during Hussein’s presidency, they became derogatory labels. In speeches he alerted Iraqis that they must protect themselves from the threat of the “sectarian infection” that the Shia community posed to Iraq. In April of 1980 Hussein also executed one of the leading Shia clerics, Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr and his sister Bint al-Huda: the incident highlighted his paranoia and distrust of the Shia community.

**Political Oppression under Saddam’s Regime**

Once Hussein established groups or communities would be included in the concept of an Iraqi national identity and which would not, he took various violent measures to intimidate the population and enforce his rule. The criminal code under Hussein listed twenty-two crimes as punishable by death penalty. For example, Article 225 established the death penalty for anyone who insulted Saddam Hussein, the Ba’ath Party, or government leadership. Citizens suspected of insulting the Ba’ath Party of Saddam often disappeared from their homes in the middle of the night or were killed in front of their families, enforcing obedience through the use of fear. Former security officials under the Ba’ath Party have reported that the regime used various

---

127 Woods, p. 84
128 Bengio, p. 101
129 Davis, p. 191
131 Congress, p. 6
torture methods on political prisoners, including rape, beatings, electric shock, cutting off limbs, and burning with hot irons.\textsuperscript{132}

Many Iraqi refugees have come forward to testify their experiences under Saddam Hussein’s violent regime. One of these refugees was Mustafa Ali Noman, a teacher in Baghdad, who was arrested without charge and imprisoned in Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. There, he was subjected to the regime’s violence for fifteen months.\textsuperscript{133} Noman never learned the reason for his arrest and was constantly referred to by the wrong name throughout his time in prison. He vividly described his harsh treatment under the regime, including how his family was discriminated against for ethnic and religious reasons. For example, he noted that his wife was a “nationality”, a term used by the regime during this time to refer to citizens of Iranian ancestry. These citizens were often viewed with suspicion and frequently deported in times of political upheaval or foreign intervention.\textsuperscript{134} He also mentioned several colleagues who refused to join the Ba’ath Party who were then abducted and executed in prison several months later.\textsuperscript{135}

Saddam’s Political Manipulation of Shia Identity

From September 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 1980 to August 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1988, Iraq was entrenched in a long, costly war with Iran that drained both countries of capital, resources and human lives.\textsuperscript{136} On the surface, the main cause of this war was a territorial dispute between Iraq and Iran for the Shatt-al-Arab, the straight that forms the border between the two nations.\textsuperscript{137} However, the deeper roots for this
war were found in the political rivalry and power struggle between Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini viewed Hussein as an oppressive dictator, while Hussein felt threatened by Khomeini’s takeover of Iran during the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and suspected that he would try to invade Iraq. Hussein chose to take an offensive stance in this conflict, and in September of 1980, he sent troops to invade Iran, expecting a swift victory. He was greatly mistaken, and both nations became locked in an eight-year war. Iraq suffered roughly 300,000 casualties, and the government went through great lengths to cover up these figures in a desperate attempt to keep its legitimacy. Although all Iraqis suffered as a result of the war, the most affected communities were the Kurds and the Shia. Throughout this tumultuous period, Hussein portrayed these communities as foreign in order to remove blame from the regime for allowing such violence to continue.  

Hate narratives towards specific ethnic groups became strong political tools used by the regime during the Iran-Iraq War to unite the population against a clearly defined enemy. In this case, this enemy was constructed to include Iraqi citizens with whom the regime took issue, portraying them as part of the same threat to the country that Iran posed. From the beginning of the war, Hussein and his regime conceptualized the conflict between Iran and Iraq as an inevitable outcome of an ancient struggle between Arabs and Persians. Hussein said the following of the Iranian Shia, “The invocation of religion is only a mask to cover Persian racism and a buried resentment of the Arab.” Therefore, he presented the Iraqi position in the war as one of defense against a racist enemy, although in reality it was Hussein who initiated the war against Khomeini. Hussein always referred to the enemy with the term “Persia” instead of “Iran”

---

138 Human Rights, p. 5  
139 Dawisha, p. 557
in order to emphasize the ethnic distinction between the two countries and present a clearly defined “other” from which Iraq must defend itself.\textsuperscript{140}

The regime’s portrayal of the Iranian Shia during the Iran-Iraq War had terrible consequences for the Iraqi Shia in terms of their interaction with the state. Hussein displayed a deep mistrust of Iraq’s own Shia community and portrayed them as part of the foreign Persian enemy. Asserting that these citizens would sympathize with Iran, the regime stripped 100,000 to 500,000 Iraqi Shia of their citizenship in 1980 and deported them to neighboring states, such as Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Iraqis who could be connected to Iran by any other means, including marriage, also faced death or deportation.\textsuperscript{141} Those who remained constituted the majority of casualties on the front lines throughout the eight-year war.\textsuperscript{142} Here, the regime introduced new policies towards targeted communities within the population; the denial of one’s citizenship and deportation. Hussein’s regime was not the first to limit the rights of the Shia community at the state level, as was evident from the British decision to label citizens’ Shia status on their identification cards under the Mandate. However, this regime placed itself in a contradictory and illogical position by denouncing racist actions towards Iraqis as a colonial legacy, and then going beyond these same actions by denying the Shia the basic rights of citizenship. Hussein was well aware of his country’s colonial past, but was willing to consent to similar racist measures as a political tool in order to consolidate his own power during a time of war with a foreign state.

In addition to constructing an “other group” based on ethnic identity, Hussein’s regime also used religion as a tool for exclusion. Here, Hussein completely departed from the Ba’ath Party’s secular ideals, the same ideals that he had stressed at the beginning of his own

\textsuperscript{140} Hussein, Saddam, and Ofra Bengio. \textit{Saddam Speaks on the Gulf Crisis: A Collection of Documents}. Tel-Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Shiloah Institute, Tel-Aviv University, 1992. P. 140
\textsuperscript{141} Mackey, p. 241
presidency, and utilized the concept of religion as a political tool for his regime. As the war progressed and the regime struggled to maintain morale despite devastating losses, this religious rhetoric became more common. Hussein portrayed the Iranians as enemies of Islam, and so it was the duty of Iraqis to defend it, stating, “We have nothing to fear from waging our struggle under the precepts of Islam and its benevolent principles.” He also stressed that there was no contradiction between Arabism, a clearly established component of Iraqi identity, and Islam because a true struggle would fuse these identities together.

The Genocide of the Kurds

As Iraqi identity became more exclusively defined through ethnic, political and religious terms throughout the Iran-Iraq War, many minority groups were increasingly viewed as the “other group”. Unfortunately, during a time of war this meant that Hussein associated them more with the Iranian enemy than their fellow Iraqi citizens. This had devastating effects for Iraq’s Kurdish population, who had frequently clashed with Iraqi governments and had continuously fought for autonomy in predominantly Kurdish regions of the country. From 1987-1989, during the most violent years of the Iran-Iraq War, the Kurds were subjected to a state-sanctioned genocide, of which the climax was the Anfal Campaign. This organized effort to eliminate the Kurds was characterized by the following: widespread use of chemical weapons, including mustard gas and nerve agent GB, the destruction of 2,000 villages, mass executions of Kurdish men, women and children, and the destruction of the Kurdish economy and infrastructure. During this time, Saddam Hussein became the first president to use chemical weapons against

---

143 Bengio, p. 21
144 Bengio, p. 22
his own population in a display of the worst episode of intolerance and ethnic cleansing in the Iraq’s modern history.\textsuperscript{146}

Throughout the Anfal Campaign, the regime targeted Kurdish villages in a highly organized manner, sending well-equipped troops with deadly weapons and clearly developed military strategies. First, the regime labeled Kurdish villages as “prohibited zones” and moved in their forces to attack any community living in these areas. Kurdish men, women and children were then held in concentration camps or attacked with chemical weapons. Elderly Kurdish citizens were sent to a camp called Nuqrat al-Salman, where many of them died due to terrible living conditions and were refused a proper burial.\textsuperscript{147} The largest chemical attack on the Kurds was in Halabja, a village on the Iraq-Iran border. On March 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1988, the Iraqi air force dropped a mix of mustard gas and nerve agent on the village under the instruction of Ali al-Majid, causing the immediate death of 3,200 to 5,000 citizens. The survivors were rounded up and murdered or placed in concentration camps.\textsuperscript{148} In reference to rumors surrounding the number of Kurds killed during the Anfal campaign, al-Majid responded, “What is this exaggerated figure of 182,000? It could not have been more than a hundred thousand!”\textsuperscript{149} Al-Majid’s response reveals a complete lack of guilt or urge to cover the murders due to a strong, state-sponsored propaganda campaign to dehumanize the Kurdish community.

Eyewitness accounts from both Kurdish victims and representatives of the regime reveal the extent of the violence during the Anfal Campaign as well as its organized, state-sponsored nature. Abdallah Abdel-Qadr al-Askari, who survived a chemical attack in the village of Guptepe, described the effects of the chemical agents on the villagers:

\textsuperscript{146} Middle East Watch. \textit{Human Rights in Iraq}. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. p. 6
\textsuperscript{148} Rohde, p. 42
\textsuperscript{149} Totten, p. 388
My brothers and my wife had blood and vomit running from their noses and mouths. Their heads were tilted to one side. They were groaning. I couldn’t do much, just clean the blood and vomit from their mouths and noses and try in every way to make them breathe again.\(^{150}\)

He then revealed that his family, which once consisted of 40 members, had now dwindled to 15: among the dead were his wife and five children.\(^{151}\)

The use of chemical weapons against the Kurds is unique in that the regime became the first in modern history to use them against its own citizens. These weapons, while officially banned by the international community, were used against Iranian troops during the Iran Iraq War. During the Anfal Campaign, Hussein engaged in the unprecedented use of chemical weapons against Iraqi civilians as a means of portraying them as part of the enemy, or foreigners on Iraqi soil during a time of war who must be removed for the country’s safety. In this case, the use of chemical weapons reveals a complete “othering” of the Kurds and a subsequent violation of the most basic human rights. Ali Hassan al-Majid revealed this dehumanization of the Kurds in a taped Ba’ath Party meeting in 1987. He described his actions during the genocide as follows:

> We continued the deportations. I told the mustashars\(^{152}\) that they might say that they like their villages and that they won’t leave. I said I cannot let your village stay because I will attack it with chemical weapons. Then you and your family will die. You must leave right now. Because I cannot tell you the same day that I am going to attack with chemical weapons. I will kill them all with chemical weapons! Who is going to say anything? The international community? Fuck them! The international community and those who listen to them.\(^{153}\)

Al-Majid’s comments reveal a cavalier attitude towards the dehumanizing treatment of Kurdish citizens that was shared by other members of the government during this time. The result of these attitudes towards an already marginalized community resulted in an institutionalized hate

---

\(^{150}\) Totten, p. 397
\(^{151}\) Totten, p. 397
\(^{152}\) A mustashar, meaning councilor or minister, functioned as advisors to the Iraqi government
\(^{153}\) Totten, 400
narratives about the Kurds that was used to justify the most dehumanizing types of punishment, including chemical weapons.

It is important to note that, while violent interactions between the Iraqi state and the Kurdish community had existed before the Anfal Campaign, the largest, most organized violence against the Kurds coincided with the height of the violence of the Iran-Iraq War. Just as the Iraqis of alleged or real Persian ancestry had been targets of the regime at the onset of the war, the Kurds became an easy scapegoat for, and diversion from, the government’s responsibility for the severe loss of human lives during the war. The political discourse engineered by the regime during this period reflects its efforts to dehumanize the Kurdish community and therefore justify the violence for which it was targeted. The term “Al-Anfal”, literally meaning “the spoils” as in the spoils of war, was borrowed from a Sura in the Quran. Hussein wrapped the genocidal campaign in this religious rhetoric despite his original claims that Iraq was a secular state, calling on the people’s Muslim identity when it was advantageous to the regime. The Sura represents the first great battle Muhammad fought at Badr: it is seen as a vindication of faith and a victory due to the direct intervention by God.\footnote{154} By using this label to refer to the Kurdish Genocide, Hussein’s regime portrayed this community not only as enemies of the state, but as unbelievers and enemies of Islam.\footnote{155}

Ba’athist officials also employed relatively neutral, official sounding labels by referring to their actions as nothing but necessary political measures. They referred to the campaign as “collective measures”, “resettlement”, “the Kurdish problem”, and “a return to the national ranks”. Hussein’s cousin Ali Hasan al-Majid who was put in control of the Anfal Campaign, referred to this clearly defined “other group” as “the saboteurs”, alluding to an alleged betrayal

\footnote{154 Rohde, p. 21 \footnote{155 Schulze, Kirsten E., Martin Stokes, and Colm Campbell. Nationalism, Minorities and Diasporas: Identities and Rights in the Middle East. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996. P. 86}
by the Kurds during the war. Using the label “prohibited villages” instead of “prohibited people” made the campaign sound more innocuous, such as when al-Maid banned all human existence in certain areas and sanctioned the mass murder of anyone found in these zones. In this context, the Kurds were constructed as trespassers on government property and therefore killed for committing a crime, not a community that had lived on this soil for centuries. By using these labels and by creating propaganda to criminalize the Kurds, the regime was able to publicly discuss the genocide without calling attention to the overt, brutal violence that occurred.\footnote{Human Rights, p. 2}

The Invasion of Kuwait and Saddam’s Use of Violence in “Shia” Uprisings

The large-scale, organized violence against the Kurds continued until the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted eight years, ended in a stalemate. In sum, Iraq had suffered thousands of casualties, $452.6 billion in material losses, and it found itself deeply in debt to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.\footnote{Davis, p. 193} The foreign debt reached $80 billion, twice that of Iraq’s GNP.\footnote{Kelly, p. 31} Following the devastating effects of the war, many citizens were coerced into submission to the state’s perception of national identity in order to avoid further violence and fragmentation. This consent to Hussein’s rule does not mean that Iraqis supported his policies, but that they wanted to reestablish a stable daily life in Iraq and feared that a change in regime would compromise this stability.\footnote{Mackey, p. 265} Despite his desire for stability, Hussein’s personal ambitions to be represented as an Arab hero, massive debt and political stress caused him to engage in violence against yet another neighboring state

\footnote{156 Human Rights, p. 2} \footnote{157 Davis, p. 193} \footnote{158 Kelly, p. 31} \footnote{159 Mackey, p. 265}
by invading Kuwait. On August 2nd, 1990, Hussein deployed 100,000 Iraqi troops and subdued Kuwait’s small army of 20,000 men within 7 hours, placing Kuwait under Iraqi occupation. The decision to invade this tiny nation, while fueled by hopes of restoring Iraq’s reputation and finances, would have devastating effects on Iraq’s Shia population and served as a turning point relations between the state and its citizens in Iraq.

In order to legitimize the invasion of Kuwait amidst its unpopularity among Arab countries and the wider international community, Hussein employed the same contradictory rhetoric relating to Iraq’s colonial past that he had used at the beginning of his presidency. First, he blamed British colonialism for separating Kuwait from Iraq by drawing the country’s artificial borders: Kuwait had been considered part of the southern province of Basra under Ottoman rule. He then presented his invasion of Kuwait as a means of undoing these wrongs that the British had imposed on Iraq during the colonial era. He stressed: “Colonialism divested it [Iraq] of a dear part of it, namely Kuwait, and kept Iraq from the waters to prevent it from acquiring part of its tactical and strategic abilities and thus kept part of its people and part of its wealth away from the origin and the well spring.” He further argued that Kuwait would be “weak, small, and lacking cultural depth” as long as it was separated from Iraq. In order to further promote his unpopular political agenda, Hussein began a policy of “Iraqizaton” of Kuwait. This policy was meant to bolster a feeling of Iraqi national identity within his own country while trying to impose this identity on Kuwait. By criticizing the political actions made by the British during the Mandate period, Hussein tried to rally Iraqis citizens in correcting these actions by taking back Kuwait to be part of Iraq. In reality, by engaging in this nationalist

---

160 Bengio, p. 27
161 Bengio, p. 25
162 Bengio, p. 22
163 Bengio, p. 26
164 Bengio, p. 26
campaign and invading Kuwait, Hussein transformed Iraq into the very sort of colonizer he sought to delegitimize.

Hussein’s decision to invade Kuwait was met with swift action by the international community. First, the United Nations attempted to undermine Saddam Hussein’s power by weakening Iraq’s economy. In August of 1990, the UN attempted to curb the regime’s power by imposing a global trade embargo on Iraq. While this tactic enraged Hussein and caused the Iraqi people to suffer, it did not end the occupation of Kuwait. In response to Hussein’s failure to respond to the actions of the international community, the United States and its allies decided to take direct military action to end the occupation. In January 1991, the US invaded Iraq, citing that it sought to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein’s forces.

In addition to taking military action, the US also encouraged Iraqi citizens, who were angered by the regime’s oppression and excessive use of violence, to overthrow the dictator and allow for a more democratic regime in Iraq. On February 15th, 1991 George H.W. Bush addressed the Iraqi people with the following: “There’s another way for the bloodshed to stop, and that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands to force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside.” The Iraqi population, assuming that the United States would therefore use its military presence in Iraq to help their cause, rose up against Saddam and attempted to overthrow his regime. In March 1991, citizens in Basra and then later in Mosul rose up against Hussein’s forces, shouting anti-regime slogans and attacking members of the Ba’ath Party in protest. Within days, the revolts had spread to nearly every major city in

---

166 Mueller, p. 145
167 Middle East Watch, p. 38
168 Middle East Watch, p. 45
Iraq, including Karbala, Najaf, Hilla and Kut. They were crushed by Saddam’s forces, and received no aid from the US military. Instead, thousands of Iraqis in Basra were killed, and two million were forced to leave their home to escape the violence. Many Iraqis viewed the United States’ passivity in the face of such atrocities against civilians as a betrayal, which damaged the relationship between the two countries.

The regime’s reaction to the uprisings, which eventually involved more than 15,000 civilians, took the form of Hussein’s familiar strategy of accusing traditionally marginalized communities of aligning themselves with foreign powers to bring down the regime in order to deflect any legitimate, wide-spread negative sentiments against the regime. This strategy is found even in the simple labeling of the uprisings as “The Shia Uprisings” to isolate and attack the Shia population and present the revolts as a product of foreign conspiracy. The fact that the revolts began in Basra was also logical given its close proximity to the violence caused by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Citizens more directly exposed to the violence would have more incentive to rise up against the regime than those who were more removed from the everyday reality of these military ventures. Soon, however, the revolts spread throughout the country in response to popular discontent with the regime. Throughout the government response to the uprisings in Basra and later in Mosul, Hussein carefully portrayed these events through an ethno-religious lens in order to delegitimize the protestor’s grievances and to detract from the reality that these were not Kurdish and Shia uprisings, but civilian uprisings representing large portions of Iraqi society against a corrupt and violent regime.

The manner in which Hussein’s regime attacked protestors in the cities of Najaf and Karbala demonstrated its efforts to delegitimize these revolts by presenting them as a foreign

169 Middle East Watch, p. 29
170 Middle East Watch, p. 38
conspiracy involving Iraqi Shia. The regime targeted Shia shrines with shelling, resulting in the complete demolition of many holy sites in both cities. For example, in Najaf, government forces targeted the Wadi al-Salaam cemetery, where Shia pilgrims from all over the world lie buried. They also targeted and destroyed many religious libraries containing ancient manuscripts. In addition, the regime targeted relatives, friends and students of Ayatollah al-Khoi, many of whom disappeared during the uprisings. The specific targeting of Shia religious sites and ayatollahs was engineered in order to associate the civilian violence with a Shia religious motive or purpose. Overall, the targeting of Iraqi Shia communities was part of Hussein’s larger strategy of divide and rule while his regime was experiencing large-scale revolts that challenged his authority.

Interviews with Iraqi Shia refugees in neighboring Turkey, Syria and Iran revealed the extent of the violence toward unarmed citizens during the uprisings. One businessman recalled returning to a house after Saddam’s loyalists had attacked his town. He recalled:

In the living room, there were the bodies of two young girls, completely naked, hung from the fan that was suspended from the ceiling...In another room was the rest of the family- eight bodies, including a child under the age of two. I saw whole families cut to pieces- arms, hands legs.

Other refugees also noted the excessive amount of violence targeted towards women and children: Republican Guards targeted them during the uprisings and tied them to tanks to use them as human shields against the rebels as a way of demeaning the Shia population. A resident of Najaf, in his interview in Qom (Iran) on March 17th also reported that the regime targeted women and children. He stated:

172 Middle East Watch, p. 27
173 Middle East Watch, p. 28
174 Middle East Watch, p. 46
175 Middle East Watch, p. 46
People were told on the loudspeakers to evacuate the city within 24 hours for their own safety and head north, in the direction of Karbala. When thousands of people had gathered in the northern outskirts of the city— it was afternoon already, around 3 o’clock, and they were mostly women and children— helicopters opened fire from machine guns at them. Between 250 and 300 people were killed.176

Other reports revealed a variety of other instances of targeted violence against civilians, including arbitrary arrests, torture and murder by tying civilians to large stones and throwing them into the Shatt al-Arab.177 Overall, eyewitness accounts all largely condemned the regime for gross violations of human rights, most notably against the civilians of Basra.

Political discourse used during the Gulf War and the uprisings in Basra, in conjunction with state-sponsored violence, served to delegitimize the Iraqi population’s grievances against the regime by painting the Shia community as criminals aligned with Iran. One of the most obvious forms this discourse took was the labeling of these revolts as the “Shia uprisings”. As the region closest to, and most affected by the violence in Kuwait, it is logical that demonstrations against the regime and the associated violence would break out in Basra. While the majority of the population of Basra was Shia, this does not mean that the population rose up against the regime because of their religious background. The label of “Shia uprisings” was a direct over simplification of the uprising popularized by the regime in order to portray the Shia as enemies of Iraq and therefore deserving of whatever violence they were subjected to by the regime. This strategy also further divided Iraqi society across sectarian lines by making even non-practicing Shia feel a need to defend this aspect of their identity as it had come under violent attack by the regime.178

176 Middle East Watch, p. 51
177 Middle East Watch, p. 48
178 Haddad, p. 9
Hussein’s regime engineered various other terms to portray the Shia community as criminal and a direct threat to Iraqi identity as a whole during what was portrayed as the Shia uprising. Interviews with Shia citizens reveal common attitudes during this time that Sunni citizens represented the regime and Iraq as a whole, while the Shia did not.\textsuperscript{179} Assuming that all citizens viewed themselves through a sectarian lens and seeking to reinforce this perspective, the regime discredited the Shia by referring to them as “shu’ubi” or “taifi” (sectarian) in Iraqi political discourse. These labels carried a heavy stigma of being an internal enemy and direct threat to the unity of the state: they were previously used to refer to all opposition groups, such as the communist party, but became reserved for the Shia as the violence of the uprisings escalated.\textsuperscript{180} One of the most devastating effects of these state-sponsored hate narratives against Shia was a shift in relationships not only between the Shia community and the state, but among civilians as well. An interviewee from Nassiriya remarked on this shift in attitudes in Iraqi society:

In the 1990’s the question of, ‘Are you Sunni or Shi’a?’ became more common. The Shi’a didn’t always say they were Shi’a. A lot of [Shi’a] families, when you ask them if they are Shi’a or Sunni avoid the question. But the Sunni will say he is Sunni directly. Why? The reason is that ‘Sunni’ is Saddam’s regime and ‘Shi’a’ isn’t.\textsuperscript{181}

This increased popular focus on religious identity of other Iraqis shows the destructive effects of the regime’s treatment towards the Shia in terms of communal relations. The original source of the uprisings in Basra was one of protest to the government’s invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent violence that ensued. However, once the regime began to attack the Shia religious identity through derogatory labels during episodes of violence, these identities became more

\textsuperscript{179} Haddad, p. 49
\textsuperscript{180} Haddad, p. 44
\textsuperscript{181} Haddad, p. 49
hardened as a means of defensive action. This hardening of identities left a lasting impression on Iraqi society that would have further violent and divisive consequences in years to come.

Conclusion

Saddam Hussein’s 24-year rule over Iraq provides valuable insight into the development of state-sponsored violence as a tool for enforcing national identity, and in the changes in communal relations in Iraq as a whole. These changes are particularly palpable during times of political upheaval and foreign intervention, such as the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War. Despite criticizing many of the racist policies of the Mandate era that marginalized entire communities in Iraq and prevented from enjoying the same status with relation to the state as the Sunni aristocracy, Hussein’s regime built upon, rather than abandoned, these political strategies in practice in order to hold on to power. The first stage in developing violence as a political tool was the regime’s treatment of Iraqis who did not politically identify with the Ba’ath Party following Hussein's rise to power. At the start of his presidency in 1979, Hussein aligned his ideals and the ideals of the Ba’ath Party with Iraqi identity and subjected any political rivals, real or alleged, to arbitrary arrest, torture, and death. This treatment of political prisoners introduced the use of violence to reinforce the state-sanctioned version of national identity as a commonly used political tool of the state. Hussein further promoted fear and large-scale violence as a political tool against specific communities in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). During the Anfal Campaign as well as the uprisings in Basra, Iraqi citizens were subjected to violations of human rights and hate narratives designed to associate them with foreign powers and deny their rights as Iraqi citizens. While British officials were largely responsible for introducing
differential access to the state in modern Iraq as a political practice, Hussein’s actions during his presidency shows Iraqi agency in exploiting this existing practice for political power.

This historical period presents an alarming trend in the relations not only between the citizens and the state, but also among citizens of differing ethno-religious backgrounds. Despite a foreign occupation and a regime change under the Mandate Era, society was not fragmented along ethno-sectarian lines or experience episodes of large-scale violence among these groups. Under Hussein’s Ba’ath Party however, particularly during the Gulf War, the question of whether citizens described themselves as Sunni or Shia, which according to many in Iraqi society was never asked prior to this time period, became more common. While the state violence towards the Shia and during Hussein’s regime certainly further institutionalized ethno-religious violence from the state to marginalized groups of civilians, the absence of inter-civilian violence as seen in modern-day Iraq reveals that an additional catalyst was needed in order to catapult to nation into full-scale sectarian violence, such as the American occupation of Iraq.
Chapter Three

The Collapse: American Occupation of Iraq and its Legacy
Introduction

Throughout the 1990s following the end of the Gulf War, Iraqi citizens suffered greatly under the sanctions and political isolation imposed by the international community designed to weaken Saddam Hussein’s regime. By the time of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country had been substantially weakened, but the government still managed to remain in control until it was toppled by American troops.¹⁸² This invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq remains puzzling in terms of true causes and motives. According to the supporters in Washington at the time of the invasion, military efforts in Iraq were justified for two main reasons. First, neoconservatives in the United States sought to promote democracy in the region through military efforts while fighting members of al-Qaeda in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001.¹⁸³ In addition, President George W. Bush and members of his administration defended their invasion of Iraq by accusing Saddam Hussein of possessing weapons of mass destruction. However, these alleged weapons were never found. Without a clearly defined set of objectives or exit strategy, both the United States and Iraq were caught in a war that cost roughly 3,000 American lives, 20,000 Americans wounded, as many as 600,000 Iraqi civilian lives, and forced 3 million Iraqis to flee to neighboring countries.¹⁸⁴ Quality of life in Iraq also diminished due to restricted access to clean drinking water, sewage treatments, and electricity.¹⁸⁵ In addition, diverse communities in Iraq that had once peacefully coexisted, even in

¹⁸² Ferguson, Charles, dir. No End In Sight. Magnolia Films. 2007. DVD.
¹⁸³ Gonzalez, p. 83
¹⁸⁵ Ferguson, Charles, dir. No End In Sight. Magnolia Films. 2007. DVD.
the midst of state-sponsored violence against specific religious and ethnic violence, became immersed in sectarian violence.\textsuperscript{186}

This chapter will focus on the impact of the new Iraqi Coalition government on communal identity in Iraq. This new administration was developed and run by both American and Iraqi political entrepreneurs, and therefore both parties share some responsibility in the contribution to the fragmentation of Iraqi society during this time period. The United States government made the controversial decisions to invade Iraq and to dismantle its ruling administration without the support of the international community. By removing the country’s only apparatus capable of maintaining stability and law and order in Iraq society, the U.S. administration became responsible for fulfilling this role by constructing a new state agency able to meet these requirements, and it failed to do so. A variety of factors, including insufficient American security forces after the fall of Baghdad, the process of de-Ba’athification, the decision to disband the Iraqi army, and the inability to imagine a new Iraqi administration not grounded in sectarian politics all contributed to the rise in insurgency and the collapse of the Iraqi state.\textsuperscript{187} In addition to these failures for which the United States must claim responsibility, one cannot ignore Iraqi agency in the rise of communal violence during this period. In the wake of the power vacuum left by Hussein’s overthrow, communities began to fight one another in hopes of gaining the favor of U.S. forces and getting a larger share of power in the new administration. What began as a fear of being marginalized once again on the grounds of identity developed into a system of violent identity politics both in the form of government corruption and the rise of ethnic and sectarian militias.


\textsuperscript{187} Ahmed, p. 65
Before identifying the errors made by American policy makers and U.S.-led Coalition forces during the occupation, it is important to take into account their perspective on the situation in Iraqi prior to the invasion. The inability to accurately understand the state of affairs in Iraq under Saddam Hussein and to present to both Iraqis and the international community clear, logical reasons to justify the military intervention had an effect on the operation’s success because it altered Iraqi citizens’ perception of this occupation’s legitimacy. As previously stated, the primary reasons given by the Bush Administration to justify this invasion were the following; an act of defense against global terrorism following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, and a necessary move to obtain and destroy weapons of mass destruction supposedly in Hussein’s possession.\(^{188}\) Prior to the occupation, neither the majority of Iraqis nor the larger international community aimed to defend Saddam Hussein, a despotic ruler who had subjected his citizens to gross violations of human rights.\(^{189}\) However, accusations that Hussein was somehow linked to the attacks of 9/11 or to groups such as al-Qaeda were conceptually problematic. While undeniably cruel, the dictator was by all accounts a secular Ba’athist ruler and had no common interests or goals, ideological or otherwise, with militant jihadists. In addition, there was no evidence for this supposed collusion between Ba’athists and members of Al-Qaeda.\(^{190}\) For many in Iraq and in the eyes of the greater international community, neither of these reasons justified the invasion.\(^{191}\)

\(^{188}\) Gonzalez, p. 83  
\(^{189}\) Gonzalez, p. 83  
\(^{190}\) Gonzalez, p. 83  
\(^{191}\) Gonzalez, p. 84
In response to these criticisms, George Bush and other members of his administration released statements calling the invasion of Iraq a humanitarian intervention designed to protect Iraqis from human rights violations under a despotic regime.\textsuperscript{192} As documented in Chapter Two, there is a great deal of documentation, including testimonies from eyewitnesses, to support the claim that Hussein committed gross violations of human rights against his own citizens prior to the invasion in 2003. If the U.S. administration sought to enter Iraq on the grounds of humanitarian intervention, it could have done so during the Kurdish Genocide in 1988 or during the uprisings against the regime in 1991. However, as seen in Chapter Two, US forces were reluctant to intervene for humanitarian reasons during this time and instead encouraged Iraqi citizens to overthrow Saddam Hussein themselves.\textsuperscript{193} Because its political leadership had already damaged its reputation with the Iraqi people in the past, the U.S. diminished the likelihood that Iraqi citizens would trust the Coalition’s motives during the 2003 occupation.

The U.S.-led Coalition’s Invasion of Iraq and the Downfall of Saddam Hussein

The United States military’s actions during the initial stages of the invasion of Iraq had tremendous ramifications for the future success of the occupation. Operation Iraqi Freedom, the name given for the U.S. occupation of Iraq, began on March 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2003.\textsuperscript{194} Baghdad fell on April 9\textsuperscript{th}, bringing an end to Hussein’s 24-year rule.\textsuperscript{195} Some of the first major issues to arise after the fall of Baghdad were the violence, looting, and overall lawlessness in the absence of sufficient security forces made available by the occupying army. These factors, uncontrolled by U.S.

\textsuperscript{192} Williams, p. 20
\textsuperscript{194} Gonzalez, p. 116
\textsuperscript{195} Gonzalez, p. 116
troops, undermined the initial Iraqi support of U.S. troops and contributed to the communal violence that ensued. Mark Kukis, a reporter for *Time Magazine*, interviewed over 100 Iraqis from a variety of backgrounds in order to construct a people’s history of a tumultuous era in Iraq. Interviewees, such as Mohammad Khalil Hamid, provided the international community with personal accounts of the chaos in Baghdad following the U.S. invasion. Hamid, who worked as a colonel in the Republican Guard, revealed his own experiences during an interview with Kukis. As a government official, Hamid had enjoyed a stable home and family before the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Like many other Iraqis, Hamid’s daily life was deeply impacted by the chaos and lawlessness that followed the American invasion of Baghdad. In order to document this turbulent period of the nation’s history, he said in an interview with Kukis:

> Man, my neighborhood was a disaster scene when I got there. The wreckage of destroyed tanks and artillery pieces was strewn everywhere. Bombed-out buildings were still on fire. Bodies were rotting in the road. The only signs of life to be seen were the warplanes in the skies and the U.S. soldiers roaming the streets. I felt so helpless when I looked at them, these occupiers. The Kuwaitis looked at us the same way when we invaded, and they had the right. Now I knew how they felt. ¹⁹⁶

Hamid’s account of Baghdad in 2003 allows for two insights. First, the lack of efficient security forces, particularly in civilian areas, disrupted everyday life and led to the collapse of law and order. This breakdown rendered citizens like Hamid eventually unable to support their families due to the lack of stable jobs. Secondly, Hamid’s account shows that Iraqis viewed the Americans as occupiers. This view of American troops removed their legitimacy and decreased the likelihood of success for any type of administration supported by these forces. In addition, the American troops’ inability to control the looting and chaos following the fall of Hussein’s

¹⁹⁶ Kukis, p. 21
regime decreased Iraqis’ overall confidence in their ability to effectively rebuild the state, contributing to the rise of local militias.197

Establishing Military Rule and De-Ba’athification

Due to the instability and overall lawlessness following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, one of the top priorities for the American troops following the invasion was to install a new administration, which, if executed effectively, would promote greater stability throughout the country. Following the removal of the dictator, President George W. Bush placed retired military general Jay Garner in charge of organizing elections, which he wanted to be held as early as possible in order to let Iraqis have a voice in the decision-making process for the new administration. In addition, he also wanted to involve the Iraqi population in deciding how to distribute the country’s assets, such as oil refineries.198 However, in May 2003, Bush replaced Garner with Paul Bremer, a retired diplomat with close ties to the Republican Party, who sought to distribute Iraq’s assets privately and delay elections until a later, unspecified date.199 Bremer and his colleagues then initiated an aggressive process of de-Ba’athification, in which all former members of the Ba’ath Party, without exception, were barred from participating in Iraq’s new government. In addition to this controversial de-Ba’athification process, Bremer also made the decision to dismantle the Iraqi army.200 On May 16th, 2003, roughly 50,000 Ba’ath Party members were fired from their positions and barred from participating in the new administration.

198 Ahmed, p. 25
199 Ahmed, p. 25
200 Williams, p. 54
When the Iraqi army was disbanded, over 500,000 young armed men were removed from their posts and left with no means of earning an income.\(^{201}\)

The decision to remove former Ba’ath Party members, while understandable in terms of trying to prevent former officials who had engaged in violations of human rights from inflicting further harm on Iraqi citizens, had several negative consequences for Iraq. For example, many U.S. officials overstepped their initial orders of only removing members from the top tiers of the party by firing the great majority of its members. Some Iraqis also took advantage of such policies and used them to eliminate political rivals.\(^{202}\) This move left ordinary Iraqis, many of whom had been coerced or intimidated into joining the Ba’ath Party, from having legitimate careers in government. In addition, the rejection of educated Iraqi citizens with an in-depth knowledge of government left the country with a power and skill vacuum, for few citizens were equipped to fill the void in such a short span of time.\(^{203}\) Peter Galbraith, former United States diplomat, expressed his concern about this sweeping policy as follows: “While intending to weed out the truly evil, he (Bremer) inadvertently fired people who joined only for careerist reasons, including doctors, teachers and the like”.\(^{204}\)

Like de-Ba’athification, the decision to dismantle the existing Iraqi army also had long-term negative consequences that contributed to Iraq’s instability. The U.S. army was unable to control the violence and looting on its own, but fired the only other establishment that had the training and resources to help maintain law and order. In sum, controversial policies such as de-Ba’athification and the disbandment of the Iraqi army not only prevented an entire class of Iraqis from participating in the rebuilding of Iraq, but they also deprived hundreds of thousands of Iraqi

\(^{201}\) Ferguson, Charles, dir. *No End In Sight*. Magnolia Films. 2007. DVD.

\(^{202}\) Ferguson, *No End In Sight*

\(^{203}\) Ahmed, p. 27

\(^{204}\) Ahmed, p. 27
families of their livelihoods. Denied a means of earning their livelihood, excluded from taking part in their government, and humiliated by the occupation of their country, former Ba’ath Party members and army officials were left with few alternatives than to join militias, which then contributed to the rise in political violence.  

Constructing a New Iraqi Administration

After establishing who would be excluded, Bremer and other members of the US Coalition began the process of choosing qualified members for the new Iraqi government. In June 2004, the Coalition handpicked Iyad Allawi and other former Iraqi exiles, most of whom already had a close relationship with American forces and had lived outside of Iraq for many years. The Iraqi administration was left little power over minor administrative decisions, over which Bremer still maintained veto power.  

Iyad Allawi, a politician of a secular Shia background with a strong relationship with the US, served as the interim Prime Minister from 2004 to 2005. Allawi had briefly been a member of the Ba’ath Party in the 1970’s before he had become involved in dissident politics. He plotted against Saddam Hussein and was eventually forced into exile after he had survived several assassination attempts. In an interview with Time Magazine, Allawi shared his perspective on the occupation and what it meant for the future of his country. He explained that, despite the anger at another foreign occupation, he and other Iraqis remained hopeful to rebuild

205 Williams, p. 54
207 Ahmed, p. 28
208 Kukis, p. 48
209 Kukis, p. 48
their country after years of sanctions and unjust rule under Saddam Hussein. However, once he was placed in the position of Prime Minister, he was shocked and frustrated about how poorly the US was prepared to rebuild an entirely new government in Iraq. He expressed criticism of the lack of American responsiveness to Iraqi advice and proposals for Iraqi suggestions as follows:

Experts from the Iraqi opposition and experts from the United States and Britain had sat down and discussed virtually all aspects of a transition. Piles and piles of reports were written, all to be tucked away and forgotten in cellars around Washington when the Pentagon was given the authority to run the country as they saw fit. And clearly they had no idea what to do.

With considerable influence from Washington, Allawi continued the task of forming his cabinet. He chose thirty-three members and tried to represent Iraq’s diverse social fabric by including people from a variety of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. For example, he assigned seven seats to Kurds in proportion to their numbers in the population. This quota system, while intended to prevent marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities, had negative consequences for communal relations in Iraqi society. By introducing a system of fixed political representation based on one’s background, the new Iraqi administration effectively reduced all the diverse political perspectives in Iraq to a game of identity politics, in which Iraqi political opportunists vied for power by fighting against fellow citizens and looking out only for the interests of their ethnic or religious communities. In time, these powerful politicizations of identities were combined with the violent tactics of sectarian militia groups and gave rise to sectarian warfare.

---

210 Kukis, p. 48
211 Kukis, p. 49
212 Ahmed, p. 53
After establishing his cabinet, Allawi arranged to hold a trial for Saddam Hussein to hold him accountable for his many violations of human rights throughout his twenty-four year rule. Hussein was accused of twelve crimes against humanity, including executing political dissidents and Islamic leaders, and using chemical weapons against the Kurds during the Anfal Campaign. 213 On November 5th, 2006 after being tried and found guilty of these charges, Hussein was sentenced to death by hanging. 214

Iraq’s First Democratic Elections of 2005: Successes, Failures, and Consequences

In spite of the political fragmentation of the new Iraqi government, Allawi and his cabinet still faced the task of running the country’s first national elections since the overthow of Saddam Hussein. In order to help achieve this goal, the Coalition hired Algerian Lakhdar Brahimi to help evaluate Iraq’s security situation before the elections, which were scheduled to take placed in January 2005. His appointment caused a dispute among Iraqis from all parts of society because he was a former supporter of Saddam Hussein. 215 During his time in the Arab League, he had denied that Hussein ever used chemical weapons against the Kurds, and had insisted that the dictator was the pride of the Arab people. 216 Therefore, his appointment reflected the Coalition’s persistent lack of knowledge of Iraq’s history and dismissal of the desires of the Iraqi people.

After Brahimi had determined Iraq’s security to be stable, the government proceeded with the elections. The results showed the extent of inequality and political fragmentation that

213 Ahmed, p. 59
215 Ahmed, p. 46
216 Ahmed, p. 46
developed since 2003. While Shia and Kurdish communities had taken part in the election in great numbers and thus became well represented in the government, many Sunnis had been excluded by the new government through measures such as de-Ba’athification and lacked political voice. The United Iraqi Alliance, composed of a variety of Shia political parties, won 48% of the vote; the Kurdish Alliance won 14%, and the remainder of Sunni or secular parties received the remaining votes.\textsuperscript{217} The Coalition was particularly disappointed by the very few votes won by Allawi’s secular party. As a result, Shia Iraqis controlled 138 of the 275 parliament seats.\textsuperscript{218} Despite many appeals, over 500 secular political candidates were banned from the political process due to alleged associations with the Ba’ath Party. Their appeals were denied without appropriate investigations, thus disenfranchising an educated group of Iraqis from engaging in the new political system.\textsuperscript{219} One of the most troubling aspects of the election results was the stark political fragmentation evident in the lack of voting participation in Sunni neighborhoods. Due to widespread boycotts in these areas, Sunni parties and politicians were severely underrepresented in the government. In addition, many accused the interim government of rigging the elections in order to decrease Sunni representation, although no evidence was found by the Coalition to support this claim.\textsuperscript{220}

Amidst the widespread frustration over the election results, tensions rose among Shia and Sunni communities and were reflected in increasingly hostile political discourse. Many Sunni citizens, angered at their own marginalization in the elections, began to view all Shia Iraqis as their enemy and referred to them as “Iranians”.\textsuperscript{221} In response, Sunni citizens were
referred to as Ba’athists and Wahabis. All of these derogatory terms were designed to associate a large portion of Iraqis with a foreign country or corrupt regime, thereby removing their legitimacy and right to participation in the government. Overall, many Iraqis were not content with the formation of parties and voting so closely associated with ethnic or sectarian identity and felt that it belittled the actual content or specific political view of each party, but it proved to be a powerful tool for political opportunists mobilizing militias. The decision to form political parties to represent the various religious and ethnic communities in Iraq, while meant to prevent marginalization of minorities, reduced the political process to voting along sectarian group identities out of fear of losing political voice. This system of power sharing based almost exclusively on political sectarian identity over national identity caused competition and tensions among diverse groups of Iraq’s society. It resembled the problematic voting system of other countries such as Lebanon where it has also caused communal conflict. Despite efforts to execute free and fair elections, Coalition forces made several key errors, including banning a huge secular population from running as political candidates and not responding to the boycotts in predominantly Sunni neighborhoods, thus enabling Shia parties to dominate the political arena with little representation from other factions of Iraqi society.

Escalating Sectarian Tensions in the Iraqi Government

Wahabism is a sect of Sunni Islam founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab (c. 1703-1791) in what is today Saudi Arabia. It is often characterized by a strict, literal reading of the Quran and rigid interpretations of appropriate Islamic conduct. In this case, the term “Wahabi” is used as a negative stereotype for all Iraqi Sunnis. The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed. | 2011

Al-Sheikh, p. 123
Andoni, p. 1
While the United States introduced divisive policies such as the quota system based on religious and ethnic identity into the new Iraqi administration, the corruption of government-run establishments and the marginalization of specific communal that resulted reveals active Iraqi agency in the fragmentation of Iraq along sectarian lines. For example, branches of government that had been dominated by Sunni elites for decades were now experiencing a shift in the balance of power, causing communal tensions both inside and outside the workplace, and threatened to prevent the government from effectively functioning. Azhar Abdul-Karim Abdul-Wahab, a professor during this time period, shared her observations of communal tensions in the workplace with reporters as follows:

I’m a Sunni and my husband, who was also a professor at the university, is a Shi’ite. A lot of Sunni staff members simply could not accept what was clearly happening— that is, the rise in the power of the Shi’ites. They could never accept the idea of an Iraq dominated by Shi’ites. Even though I am a Sunni I took another view. The Shi’ites and the Kurds had suffered a lot under the previous regime. Why should they not have a chance to run the country? That view caused me a lot of problems with my colleagues at work and even my close family.227

Azhar’s observations demonstrate that, despite recent developments in government-controlled establishments such as the education system to challenge the status quo and incorporate more diversity, social tensions were escalating just beneath the surface. Her point of view does not represent entire Shia or Sunni communities in Iraq as they do not constitute monolithic groups, but rather it shows prejudices and assumptions at play during this time period. According to Azhar, many Sunnis, particularly those who had been labeled as ex-Ba’athists and had been prevented from taking part in Iraq’s new administration, felt alienated and resented Shia and Kurdish citizens for assuming the positions they had once occupied. In

---

227 Kukis, p. 55
the power vacuum left by the U.S.-led Coalition’s exclusion of Sunni citizens from these
government posts, members of the Shia and Kurdish communities were able to fill these
vacancies. This particular viewpoint showcases how existing assumptions regarding Iraqis of
different ethnic or religious backgrounds, while not necessarily harmful in isolation, became
more problematic and even potentially violent when they were politicized by the existing
administration. Azhar herself notes that not all Sunnis harbored such resentments or felt
threatened by the increase in the rights of Shia and Kurds, who had suffered greatly under the
previous regime.

Heightening tensions in other branches of government caused the fragmentation of
these establishments across sectarian lines and prevented its officials from working together
in an effective and productive manner. Abu Mustapha, an official of the Iraqi Department of
Agriculture, was able secure his job after the US invasion in 2003.228 In his interview, he
documented the changes he observed in his everyday work environment. 229 First, he noticed
the images of Shia icons and clerics being posted around the office. 230 He observed:

Gradually people claiming to be doing the bidding of Shi’ite religious authorities began
to fill the posts left open by the vanished Ba’athists. People known to be thieves or
petents, even illiterates, were suddenly running important offices, and they began
verbally abusing and firing Sunnis or anyone they distrusted. More than two-dozen
senior officials who had been important to the ministry’s work were kicked out by
these new bosses. These were the ministry’s technocrats, scientific men who didn’t
have any sectarian leanings to speak of. 231

Mustapha’s observations exposed the infiltration of various government branches by
sectarian--leaning militants, many of whom were granted these positions as personal favors
from those in power. As the violence escalated, many weapons used in communal violence

228 Kukis, p. 51
229 Kukis, p. 52
230 Kukis, p. 52
231 Kukis, p. 53
throughout the country were traced back to these ministries. In response to these new changes, Sunnis in the Ministry of Agriculture began to move their offices to one hallway, and the Shia to another. Mustapha insisted that he had never seen this self-segregation and inability to efficiently work with citizens of a different religious or ethnic background before the U.S. invasion. Such tensions, as seen in these professional spaces, revealed a deeply fragmented political system in which officials were unable to perform daily functions and which was easily exploited by radical militants. The observations of these various government agencies show that, despite efforts to rebuild a new unified Iraqi administration and society, religious and ethnic divisions became deeply rooted into this political system almost as quickly as it was formed.

The Rise of Sectarian Militias in Iraq

One of the greatest shortcomings of the Coalition forces and the new Iraqi-run government was the failure to control the rise of insurgent groups, either by providing sufficient security forces or allowing members of the Iraqi army to work with the Coalition. This eventually caused Iraq to become engulfed in full-scale sectarian violence. While there were attacks by suicide bombers as early as the US invasion in 2003, militias became more active and violent throughout the occupation, with violent insurgent activity peaking in 2006-2007. During this period, daily life was completely disrupted by violence, with Baghdad witnessing 10-15 bombings per day. Militias of varying religious and ethnic backgrounds

---

232 Kukis, p. 53
233 Kukis, p. 54
234 Iraq Profile, BBC News, 2012
235 Ferguson, Charles, dir. No End In Sight. Magnolia Films. 2007. DVD.
targeted Americans and Iraqi citizens, which had devastating consequences for communal relations and state building. Many Iraqis who tried to become involved in the National Iraqi Accord were targeted by insurgent groups, making it difficult for them to have a safe and successful livelihoods. Rendered largely obsolete in terms of efficiently maintaining Iraq’s safety and stability, these militias took advantage of this power vacuum and sought to control the fragmented country through organized crime and sectarian violence. Through government corruption, kidnapping, and violence towards civilians, these militias became a powerful force in Iraq, almost serving as a proxy state in light of the failures of the new administration. In sum, they are clear evidence of the extent of Iraqi agency in contributing to the disintegration of the political system as well as communal relations.

The Establishment of Shia Militias

Soon after the establishment of this deeply flawed political system, both Sunni and Shia Iraqis began to organize militia groups whose leaders filled the power vacuum left by an inefficient Iraqi state entity. Shia political factions include the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) led by Abdul al-Hakim, al Dawa led by al-Maliki, and the Sadr movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr. Many of these militia members also held official positions in the new government, which allowed them to gain access to valuable intelligence and weapons to engage in ethnic cleansing campaigns. Armed with foreign aid from Iran and other nations, weapons, and a means of manipulating government resources for their own agenda, these militias

236 Kukis, p. 111
238 Ahmed, p. 15
239 Gonzalez, p. 119
proved to be a dangerous force, both in terms of destabilizing the fragile administration and engaging in sectarian violence against their fellow Iraqi citizens.

One of the most prominent Shia militia groups was the Badr Brigade, which had been formed in 1982 during the Iran-Iraq War.\textsuperscript{240} This militia was established as the militarized wing of the SCIRI, or the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the most popular political party in Iraq composed primarily of Shia citizens.\textsuperscript{241} Many of its members were driven underground or to Iran during Saddam Hussein’s rule, but reemerged in Iraq upon the US occupation. Badr Brigade members became known for disguising themselves in official government uniforms and then carrying out acts of large-scale acts of violence against civilians in predominantly Sunni areas of Iraq. While they targeted entire Sunni civilian neighborhoods with violence, Badr Brigade members also used their forces to protect Shia areas from al-Qaeda and other Sunni insurgent groups.\textsuperscript{242} Many Iraqis viewed this group with suspicion, not only for their violent tactics but also because of their association with Iran; they believed that these members were being utilized by a foreign body to undermine the success of Iraq’s new administration.\textsuperscript{243} In addition to violent tactics and accusations of ties to foreign nations, the Badr Brigade reveals the infiltration of government resources by violent militias: this organized crime soon became a staple of occupied Iraq.\textsuperscript{244} The group’s ability to access resources such as government uniforms reveals that corruption was already established in the new Iraqi administration shortly after its formation, and that sectarian ideologies that fueled the violence that had permeated the many layers of Iraqi society.\textsuperscript{245}

\textsuperscript{240} Gonzalez, p. 124
\textsuperscript{242} Gonzalez, p. 124
\textsuperscript{243} Gonzalez, p. 125
\textsuperscript{244} Williams, p. 50
\textsuperscript{245} Gonzalez, p. 125
Unlike the Badr Brigade, which had existed before the American occupation but certainly became more active afterwards, the Mahdi Army was an entirely new phenomenon in Iraq that arose after the invasion in 2003. This militia formed out of volunteers, mostly Shia residents of the working class neighborhood in Baghdad known as Sadr City, in which Ayatollah Muqtada al-Sadr had his support base and sphere of influence. Al-Sadr emphatically denounced the presence of US troops on Iraqi soil and called on these volunteers to form a militia and fight against the occupation. The majority of the Mahdi Army members were not recruited through any sort of formal process until the organization became more bureaucratized several years into its operation. Despite evidence to the contrary, al-Sadr denounced the idea of partition based on different ethnic and religious identities in Iraq. He denied any part in sectarian violence and instead accused the U.S. forces of deliberately inciting violence among these religious communities as part of a divide and rule policy.\textsuperscript{246} Like other militia groups, the Mahdi Army also depended on methods of organized crime as the primary source of its income, including robbery of petroleum, cars and houses during ethnic cleansing campaigns.\textsuperscript{247}

Several Iraqi citizens have come forward and shared their experiences with the Mahdi Army with reporters. Some of these men and women had supported the movement, either by taking up arms or by offering accommodations to volunteers. Others have witnessed, or had been subjected to, acts of sectarian violence at the hands of the Mahdi Army. For example, Ahmed Abu Ali, a deeply religious man living as a shopkeeper in Baghdad, had never been involved in the army or politics prior to the U.S. invasion. At first, he supported the U.S. presence because he had suffered under Saddam Hussein’s regime for avoiding military service, and believed that the dictator’s overthrow would allow for the country to rebuild itself, free from such an

\textsuperscript{247} Williams, p. 51
oppressive force. Upon seeing Coalition forces overthrow the dictator, he expressed “Look, I am a Shi’ite. I know Saddam and his butchers. I had felt that tyranny and oppression touching me every day of my life, and at that moment I could feel it all just melting away”. However, he also mistrusted U.S. motives in Iraq due to their refusal to help the Iraqi population overthrow Hussein during its last intervention in the country, the Gulf War. While George Bush had encouraged Iraqis in Basra to overthrow Saddam, U.S. forces offered no aid when they attempted to do so, and they were crushed by the regime’s retaliation as a result. He came to see the presence of U.S. troops as harmful to Iraq, and he decided to join the Mahdi Army to fight against the occupation. In this case, Ahmed expressed no tensions or hatred towards Iraq’s Sunni population. Thus, Ahmed’s view towards the United States shows that U.S. military forces had already damaged their reputation among Iraqi citizens well before the invasion in 2003. Since they had failed to help the population to overthrow an oppressive dictator and rebuild a safe and stable Iraq in 1991, he saw no reason to believe that they would do so in 2003.

Despite the dangers associated with going against the Mahdi Army, some Iraqis did so in order to defend their fellow Iraqis from violent attacks based solely on their sectarian identity. Rachim Hassan Haikel, who had worked under Saddam Hussein distributing commodities such as flour, sugar and tea to Iraqi families during international sanctions, constantly struggled with militias such as the Mahdi Army in order to deliver supplies to families in need regardless of their religious affiliation. In order to offer aid to Shia families being persecuted by Sunni insurgents, the Mahdi Army often robbed government officials like Rachim in order to steal

248 Kukis, p. 8
249 Kukis, p. 8
250 Kukis, p. 11
251 Kukis, p. 91
rations designated for Sunni families. Despite these dangers, he continued to deliver supplies to Sunni families. While living in neighborhoods controlled by the Mahdi Army forces, he noted that these militiamen often used abandoned houses of Sunni families as torture centers. He said about these affected neighborhoods affected by the militia’s presence: “They were losers. They were thugs. They were ruining our neighborhood. It used to be a good place, a place where people of both sects wanted to live. Now it had a reputation as a militia haven.”

The activities of the Mahdi Army and other militia groups disrupted all levels of Iraqi society by introducing sectarian violence to the residential areas of Iraq. This led to communal violence in which civilians turned against other civilians because the political leaders were fighting one another for control over the state.

The Coalition, in an effort to stabilize Iraq amidst the chaos caused by the violence from various militia groups, employed a strategy of divide and rule when dealing with the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army. While both groups utilized violence to establish control and legitimacy, the Badr Brigade enjoyed more legitimacy than the Mahdi Army through its political arm, the SCIRI. The Coalition leaders were aware of the SCIRI’s alleged affiliation with Iran and sectarian political goals. However, the establishment of the SCIRI as a legitimate political party and its success in national elections cemented the organization’s presence as a prominent political force. In an effort to downplay its previous involvement with violence and foreign governments, the group dropped the “Revolution” from its name and became the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq in 2007. In addition, it also shifted its public allegiance from Iranian

252 Kukis, p. 92
253 Kukis, p. 92
254 Kukis, p. 93
Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to Iraqi Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In response to these political moves and cooperation with U.S. forces, the Coalition supported the ISCI over the Mahdi Army, which lacked a legitimate political branch. However, the decision to favor one Shia militia over another furthered sectarian conflict within the country, both in terms of divisions within Shia political organizations and with other groups with sectarian ideologies. While the ISCI certainly made efforts to eliminate its more violent branches such as the Badr Brigade and establish itself as a legitimate political party, its Shia bias has been well established and favors government partisanship that may further sectarian violence.

Causes, Dimensions, and Consequences of the Sunni Insurgency

Shia militiamen were not the only ones to exploit existing sectarian tensions to promote their own vision of Iraq’s future: Sunni militia groups used similar violent tactics to achieve their goals. The Sunni insurgency that arose after the invasion in 2003 was not a monolithic phenomenon, but rather a diverse amalgam of militias that, due to a variety of ideologies, all fought against the occupation. Sunni insurgents included ex-Ba’athists who had been excluded from the new government due to the de-Ba’athification policy, domestic and foreign members of Al-Qaeda, nationalist Salafists, and transnational Salafists. This insurgent movement had two main origins, although motives were varied among the different

---

256 “Shiite”, p. 1
257 “Shiite”, p. 1
259 Militant Salafists are an extremist minority group that constitutes less than 1% of the Muslim population. They subscribe to a polarized worldview in which the West is seen as an imminent threat to Islam, and organizations subscribing to this particular belief system utilize violence and terrorism as their primary tools of defending Islam from Western attacks. Such groups include al-Qaeda in Iraq. Livesey, Bruce. “Special Reports: The Salafist Movement.” PBS. PBS, 25 Jan. 2005. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html>.
260 Gonzalez, p. 127
organizations. On a pragmatic level, these insurgents were deeply angered at the violence caused by the American occupation in addition to their country being occupied by what they viewed as an imperialistic foreign power. Other groups, such as Al-Qaeda, derived their motivation from their interpretation of a particular religious ideology. According to these insurgents, the occupation of Iraq was only one site of a global attack on Islam and occupation of Muslim lands by Israel, the United States, and other Western powers. In general, many Sunnis felt alienated by the new government during this time period because many U.S. Coalition officials unfairly associated them with Hussein’s regime, while they viewed Shia and Kurdish citizens as more reliable.

In addition to former Ba’ath Party members, a separate group of Sunni insurgents included al-Qaeda members who had begun to operate in Iraq after the American invasion and subsequent occupation. Al-Qaeda’s presence and operations in Iraq aimed not only at resisting the occupation, but also at killing as many American and Iraqi Shia citizens as possible. Al-Qaeda’s main sources of income in Iraq included ransom for both Iraqi and foreign kidnapped individuals, which put Iraqi civilians, especially those who were already targeted by the organization such as the Shia, in a particularly dangerous position. The targeting of Shia citizens was due to the view held by Al-Qaeda members that the Shia are not Muslims but rather apostates of Islam and, along with the United States and other Western powers, a threat to the worldwide Islamic community. Al-Qaeda also used anti-Shia hate narratives to incite other Iraqi citizens who believed that the U.S. had blindly supported Shia citizens and marginalized others, to fight against the U.S. occupation. Al-Qaeda’s presence in Iraq also highlights an important

---

261 Hashim, p. 14
262 Hashim, p. 15
263 Gonzalez, p. 29
264 Williams, p. 51
factor contributing to the sectarian violence in Iraq: the influence of foreign militans. The U.S. Military’s Center for Combating Terrorism discovered that up to 75% of suicide bombers in Iraq between August 2006 and 2007 were foreigners.265 The head of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Al-Zarqawi, was a Jordanian citizen and relied on troops that were also not originally from Iraq: 60% of these foreign fighters were from Saudi Arabia and Libya.266 Reporters for foreign news sources such as the New York Times described these young recruits for Al-Qaeda as “young, angry men, motivated by the anti-British, anti-American rhetoric that fills their ears every day.”267 This jihadi movement, due to its association with foreign influence, was also less popular among Iraqi citizens who wanted to rebuild Iraq as part of a national project.268 Even within the bounds of the Sunni insurgency as a whole, the lack of grassroots leaders, Al-Qaeda’s rigid stance on Islam, and the use of extreme violence were largely unpopular and viewed as a source of tension with other insurgent groups.269 In particular, many of these groups took issue with Al-Qaeda’s tactics of targeting places of worship and kidnapping civilians and viewed these practices as unacceptable.270

Many Iraqi citizens witnessed Sunni insurgent groups such as Al-Qaeda transform their formerly peaceful neighborhoods into centers of violent actions and ideologies. Ahmed Ibrahim Abdul Wahab, an engineering student and resident of Ameriya, was disturbed not only by the excessive violence used against civilians in his neighborhood, but also by Al-Qaeda’s efforts to undermine peaceful relations between religious and ethnic groups within this region and to

265 Gonzalez, p. 118
266 Gonzalez, p. 118
P. 13
269 Hashim, p. 59
270 Hashim, p. 60
spread their own ideologies such as hatred towards Shia citizens.²⁷¹ He observed, “One of the mosques in the area known for its sectarian leanings became a gathering point for those of the Al-Qaeda mindset. That was when this new ideology began emerging in the neighborhood. People started saying that Shi’ites were infidels”.²⁷² Labeling Shia Iraqi civilians as infidels had been a government practice under Saddam Hussein, but had not permeated the mindset of Iraqi society until the political violence and insurgent activities of after 2003. Ahmed also reported Al-Qaeda members writing slogans such as “jihad” and “fight the occupier” on the walls of residential areas and attacking any local citizens who offered help to Shia families that were subjected to violent acts of prejudice on a daily basis.²⁷³

Omar Yousef Hussein, a Sunni from Baghdad, shared in an interview his motives for joining the Sunni insurgency and his views on inter-communal relations in post-2003 Iraq. Unlike the ex-Ba’athists who joined the insurgency, Omar had no association with the previous regime. In fact, he had suffered under the previous regime’s repression and spent eight years in prison during this time period for political dissidence.²⁷⁴ Despite having been alienated by the previous regime, Omar felt angered by the American occupation, believing the United States had no right to invade and occupy the country, and therefore joined a group of fellow Sunnis to fight against American troops. Having spent much of his youth in prison and then having seen his country being divided by foreign powers, he described feeling a sense of empowerment by joining the insurgency and fighting back against these powers by manufacturing roadside bombs.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ Kukis, p. 56
²⁷² Kukis, p. 58
²⁷³ Kukis, p. 58
²⁷⁴ Kukis, p. 41
²⁷⁵ Kukis, p. 43
Despite the fact that his entire group of insurgents consisted of Sunnis, Omar insisted that prejudice towards Shia Iraqis was never a factor in his group’s composition. He explained:

A lot of us, myself included, were very conservative religiously. But that was not the point. We did not want to waste time on arguments over religion. Doing so would have been a distraction. That’s why we excluded the Shi’ites. We knew there would be conflicts about that. Our base of support then was basically conservative rural Sunnis who in general took a dim view of Shi’ites. If we were working closely with Shi’ites, we might have lost some support in Sunni areas like where we held the meeting. So we just decided to avoid this whole problem mostly for organization purposes, not sectarian or ideological reasons.\(^{276}\)

Omar’s commentary reveals a great deal regarding sectarian relations in Iraq during the insurgency. For example, his insistence that religious difference was not a motivating factor in excluding Shia citizens from joining his insurgent group suggests that he was reluctant to be honest with the interviewer regarding his views towards this community. His failure to acknowledge the prejudices of his main base of support reveals a state of denial regarding the rising tensions among these communities throughout the country. The fragmentation, even among insurgent groups, is particularly troubling given the history of interactions between Sunni and Shia citizens during times of foreign occupation in Iraq. During the Mandate period, many Iraqis had put aside any existing social tensions in the presence of a common enemy, in this case the British, in order to drive out the foreign invader. However, Omar’s testimony reveals a sharpening of these tensions to the point where they divide Iraqi society even during a deeply unpopular foreign occupation. Groups such as Al-Qaeda contributed to the fragmentation of Iraqi society, largely by foreign influence and militants.\(^{277}\) Despite his desire to deny his own anti-Shia

\(^{276}\) Kukis, p. 41
\(^{277}\) Kukis, p. 43
sentiments, the actions of his militia reveal the politicization of religious and ethnic communities through the use of violence.

Kurdish Militias and the Struggle for Kurdish Autonomy

A third area of militia activity, although not as widespread as the Sunni insurgency or Shia militias, was the group of Kurdish political factions known as the Peshmerga. The Peshmerga was an amalgamation of previously existing militarized Kurdish groups, including the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) founded in 1975, and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) founded in 1946. While these parties represented different sub-groups, they largely coexisted peacefully and formed an alliance during the American occupation in order to pursue the shared goal of greater Kurdish autonomy. The majority of Kurdish citizens did not become involved in ethnic or religious violence: due to their marginalized status under Saddam Hussein’s regime, many Kurds were willing to work with the Coalition in order to achieve greater autonomy. However, Iraqis who joined the Peshmerga tried to achieve this goal for the Kurdish region of Iraq through tactics that were violent or prejudiced towards Iraq’s Arab population. For example, Peshmerga forces tried to reverse Saddam Hussein’s policy of moving Arab families into Mosul as part of his Arabization campaign. As part of this policy, Kurdish civilians had been forcefully uprooted from their homes and forced to flee the region. In attempting to reverse the effects of this campaign, Peshmerga forces terrorized Arab citizens in the region and tried to intimidate them into leaving. Rahma Abdul Kareem Abbas, who moved

279 Ahmed, p. 54
with her family from Baghdad to escape the violence and stayed with family friends in Mosul, observed the effects of these tactics as follows:

The Peshmerga, the Kurdish fighters were in that area, and they were trying to stop Arab families from settling there. They would search houses and go through the streets whooping war cries, like Indians of the Wild West or something. We were lucky, because we were staying with a Kurdish family. They kept us inside and did not let anyone search the house.\textsuperscript{280}

While visitors to the region such as Rahma were certainly exposed to the violent tactics of the Peshmerga, Arab citizens who had lived in the region for decades suddenly became the primary target of the group. Hayder Hamad Jawad moved from Baghdad to Kirkuk during the Arabization campaign while he was working as a police officer. He lost his job in 1994 because a family member criticized Saddam Hussein, but he remained in Kirkuk and had been a resident of the region with his family from this point forward. After the U.S. invasion and the overthrow of Hussein’s regime, Hayder tried to become a police officer once again, but was frustrated by the prejudice towards Arab Iraqis that had emerged in Kirkuk due to the Peshmerga’s activities. He observed, “I went right away and tried to get my job back, but it was like some kind of joke. They weren’t hiring Arabs in Kirkuk, only Kurds. The city was slowly being taken over by Kurds.”\textsuperscript{281} In order to further isolate Arab residents, signs all over the city were switched from Arabic to Kurdish. Unprovoked acts of violence towards Arab citizens also increased. In response to these changes, Hayder noted, “It was all very strange to me, actually, this change. I had never known Kirkuk to be a violent place. For me it had always been a peaceful, dignified city where Arabs, Kurds and Turkomen all mingled together.”\textsuperscript{282}

\textsuperscript{280} Kukis, p. 23  
\textsuperscript{281} Kukis, p. 66  
\textsuperscript{282} Kukis, p. 67
The Coalition was not solely responsible for the rise in insurgency in Iraqi in terms of condoning or supporting the actions of these organizations. However, their failure to control the influx of militants from neighboring countries such as Iran and Syria, along with the corruption in the new government allowing Shia militias to hijack branches of the administration caused sectarian violence to permeate every level of Iraqi society. The failure to control the chaos and looting at the onset of the 2003 invasion also caused the masses to lose faith in the Coalition’s ability to stabilize Iraq, thereby unintentionally giving legitimacy to militias that rose up to control the country through violence. In addition to domestic political conflict, Iraq was also influenced by extremist violent ideologies, like those of Al-Qaeda, which were initially due to foreign influence. Many Iraqis who participated in interviews observed the violent tactics used by these militia groups and insisted that they had never felt nor witnessed such tensions among citizens until organized violence and extremist ideologies hardened the dividing lines. Polling results collected by the International Republican Institute in March 2006 confirmed the attitudes reflected in these interviews: over 90% of the Iraqi population believed that, despite maintaining security in regions where the government had lost control, the militias had had a debilitating impact on the unity of the nation and should be completely disbanded. In addition, 65% of Iraqis felt that militias made Iraq a more dangerous, not more secure, place to live. Allowing members of Al-Qaeda to cross the borders into Iraq enabled the group to mount a strong insurgency, interfering with the new Iraqi administration and damaging the daily lives of Iraqi citizens by sowing fear and communal violence.

285 Kukis, p. 160
The Culmination of Sectarian Violence in Iraq- Fallujah and “The Surge”

The anger over the election results and dissatisfaction over a voting system built on sectarian identity caused widespread violence throughout Iraq. At the state level, specific branches of government were infiltrated by militias who took advantage of state resources to engage in large-scale violence against civilians based on their group identity. A prime example of the hijacking of government resources for sectarian violence was seen in the Bunker Prison episode in 2005, in which Shia militants infiltrated the Ministry of the Interior to torture and starve Sunni citizens in state prisons. Thus, while the ruling administration did not sanction these episodes of violence, its inability protect its own branches of government from corruption perpetuated the use of violence against civilians through state resources. In the wider Iraqi community, diverse neighborhoods that had peacefully coexisted became centers of sectarian violence through the exploitation of violence and dangerous ideologies propagated by militias such as Al-Qaeda and the Mahdi Army. The frequency and intensity of these episodes culminated in Fallujah, a once peaceful suburb of Baghdad, where the severity of social fragmentation across ethnic and sectarian lines manifested itself in violence.

In addition to its failure to control lawlessness shortly after the invasion, to prevent insurgents from crossing the border into Iraqi, and to stabilize the country as communal violence increased, the Coalition’s excessive use of violence in civilian areas further contributed to the rise in sectarian tensions and the overall social fragmentation of the country. Like several formerly peaceful neighborhoods in Baghdad, Fallujah had no past history of ethnic or religious violence until the development of Iraqi militia groups in Iraq after the 2003

\[286\] Ahmed, p. 98
invasion. After this date, however, Sunni insurgents had transformed this area into a center for manufacturing weapons and training its members.\footnote{Ahmed, p. 76} In 2004, violence broke out in Fallujah when insurgents killed four Blackwater troops, members of a private contracting group working for the U.S. army, as part of their organized resistance to the American occupation. U.S. forces demanded that the insurgents of Fallujah turn over those who were responsible for these attacks. When they refused, U.S. forces attacked the neighborhood and bombed a well-known mosque in the area. The attack provoked outrage among Iraqi citizens who viewed U.S. actions as excessive use of violence in a residential area. While the specific number of Iraqi deaths during these attacks is difficult to assess, groups such as the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that during just the first week of attacks on Fallujah, more than 700 Iraqi civilians were killed, 550 of whom were women and children.\footnote{“Iraq: Death Toll in Fallujah Rising, Doctors Say.” \textit{IRIN Middle East}. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 04 Jan. 2005. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/24527/IRAQ-Death-toll-in-Fallujah-rising-doctors-say>.} Overall, the attacks on Fallujah for many Iraqis represented a complete outrage over the United States military’s excessive use of violence against civilians, and any popular support among Sunni communities for U.S. presence in Iraq had been lost.\footnote{Ahmed, p. 72} From the U.S. perspective, this event signaled a need for a change in strategy in its treatment of civilians in order to garner more support, in this particular case from Sunni Iraqis.

The attacks on Fallujah aggravated existing tensions and episodes of sectarian violence in the community since the 2003 invasion and served as a catalyst for what became known as “The Surge”. During the Surge, the U.S. military attempted to alter its policies towards civilians based on the massive outraged provoked in Fallujah, and attempted to win the hearts
and minds of Sunni Iraqis. The catalyst for the violence leading up to the Surge was bombing of the Shia al-Askari mosque in Samarra on February 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2006 by Sunni insurgents. In addition to killing innocent civilians, this attack also served as an assault on Shia identity in general by destroying one of its most prominent landmarks in the country. Thus, attacks such as the bombing of the al-Askari mosque only served to further perpetuate sectarian violence by inciting outrage among civilians who became threatened by those insulting an aspect of their communal and individual identity. Shia Iraqis, threatened by this assault on this dimension of their identity, retaliated by attacking and burning a predominantly Sunni neighborhood near Latifiya allegedly harboring citizens who participated in bombings in Najaf and Karbala. These tit-for-tat episodes of violence continued from 2006-2007. As the violence increased, so did the derogatory discourse towards each community. While all Sunnis were referred to as Al-Qaeda extremists, Shia Iraqis were seen as Iranians.\textsuperscript{290} This increase of stereotyping reflects a troubling shift in societal attitudes capable of doing more long-term damage to the nation in terms of communal relations than any specific episode of violence. Previous administrations have utilized powerful hate narratives such as these in order to achieve political goals, but never before in Iraq’s modern history have such terms permeated the community and resulted in such inter communal tensions without encouragement from the state.

“The Surge”, or the military movement designed to end the escalation of this sectarian warfare, was executed through the combined forces of American military personnel and volunteer Iraqi citizens trying to regain control over their community from violent militia groups in what became the Awakening Movement. During this movement, Sunni militias worked alongside U.S. forces to subdue the escalating violence in residential areas. In particular, Sheikh Sattar Abu Risha became the first tribal leader to throw his support behind

\textsuperscript{290} Ahmed, p. 12
this joint military effort in January of 2007, and was able to convince several other prominent members of the community to do the same.\textsuperscript{291} This military campaign, composed of volunteers and mostly Sunni insurgents brought to a halt the ethnic and religious violence in Baghdad’s most unstable neighborhoods, such as al-Anbar.\textsuperscript{292} While American forces certainly contributed to the stabilization of these neighborhoods plagued by sectarian warfare, they could not have successfully weakened the resistance without the aid of those involved in the Awakening Movement.\textsuperscript{293} While the presence of U.S. troops and their efforts to curb violence in Iraq are temporary, the participation of concerned citizens such as those of the Awakening Movement are necessary in implementing permanent conflict resolution in the country.

Conclusion

The American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq since 2003 ushered in the most tumultuous and complex era of ethnic and sectarian communal relations in the country’s modern history. The causes of the rise in tensions, hate narratives and episodes of large-scale violence against civilians during this period are extremely varied and complex, making a successful plan for reconciliation a nearly impossible task. Unlike earlier periods in Iraq’s modern history in which political discourse and violence against certain ethnic and religious groups were propagated by the ruling regime, post-2003 Iraq witnessed the breakdown of inter-societal relations and the culmination of ethnic and sectarian violence at both the state and community level. At the state level, the formation of political parties that actively mobilized and manipulated sectarian identities in addition to the infiltration of government ministries by

\textsuperscript{291} “Iraq after the Surge”, p. 11
\textsuperscript{293} “Iraq After the Surge”, p. 17
violent militias rendered the new administration incapable of successfully performing its everyday tasks and allowed for prejudices to take hold in official government offices. At the community level, the presence of violent militias with sectarian ideologies targeted ordinary citizens for violence and removed the possibility of peaceful coexistence among diverse religious and ethnic inhabitants.

While the United States is not solely responsible for this collapse of Iraqi society, its flawed policies concerning several key strategies in managing the occupation served as catalysts to propel Iraq into this state. Policies such as de-Ba’athification and the disbanding of the Iraqi army removed Iraq’s ability to stabilize the nation in the face of lawlessness and looting and alienated and nearly an entire class of citizens from participating in the new administration’s democratic process. The disenfranchisement of these individuals, in addition to the failure to control the influx of foreign insurgents, gave rise to powerful and violent militias such as the Badr Brigade, Al-Qaeda and the Mahdi army. These militias have contributed to the breakdown of Iraqi society by playing on existing tensions among ethnic and religious communities. Citizens facing discrimination and violent attacks, having lost faith in the ability of American forces to protect them, vested their trust in militias as their only source of protection. The culmination of these errors, combined with the militias’ unchecked violent ideologies and terrorist attacks against ordinary citizens, produced the failed state mired in full-scale sectarian warfare that is the state of Iraq today.

---

295 Bingham, p. 50
Conclusion
This thesis has traced the development of the construction of national and sub-national identities as a political tool in the Iraqi state, the use of violence to reinforce identity, and the shift of the use of violence against civilians from the state to non-state civilian perpetrators. I have analyzed the concept of identity as it was understood in each specific historical period. For example, I examined ethnic, religious, and national identity, and asked how governments and other political and military leaders have shaped the concept of identity to suit personal or collective political interests, particularly during periods of foreign interference or direct intervention or war. Questions addressed throughout this research included, How have different government administrations throughout Iraq’s history manipulated the concept of identity for their political goals? When did violence become a primary tool for enforcing these reconstructed identities?, and, How and why did leaders of militias recruiting civilians begin using this strategy to incite communal violence in Iraq after the 2003 US invasion?. I took these questions into consideration both when researching and analyzing specific historical periods of modern Iraq, and more globally in order to highlight overarching trends in the practice of violence to enforce identity as it is prevalent in current politics.

Throughout the history of modern Iraq, ruling regimes have intentionally reshaped the concept of identity, and have used these imagined identities to marginalize entire communities to further their own political agendas. Throughout the British Mandate era and Saddam Hussein’s reign, the concept of identity was used as tool of the state and as a means of social and political control. As we have observed in Chapter One, British policy makers in charge of assembling a new Iraqi government built on existing practices of Sunni dominance and Shia marginalization under the Ottoman Empire by legalizing this system of identity-based discrimination. Under
Saddam Hussein, the Ba’ath Party criticized the policies of British colonialists and emphasized equality among all citizens. However, this lofty rhetoric directly contrasted with Hussein’s actual treatment of Iraqi citizens, and he enforced his interpretation of Iraqi identity through state-sponsored violence. Finally, throughout the US invasion of subsequent occupation of Iraq, the concept of identity was again used for political manipulation, and violence was used as the primary tool of hardening these identities. However, this period was unique in the context of Iraqi modern history because the perpetrators of large-scale violence against civilians were no longer officials of the state, but the leaders of sectarian militias.

The long-standing practice by different and successive state powers in Iraq of reinterpreting and violently enforcing national identity, culminating in the collapse of the state in 2003 and the U.S.-led Coalition’s failure to establish security and stability during the occupation, led to the presence of militias that used organized violence against civilians of differing ethnic and religious backgrounds. While the United States committed many blunders throughout this period, there was also Iraqi agency in the rise of sectarian violence, as seen in the corruption in government ministries and the violent actions of government officials and other political and religious leaders of sectarian-leaning militias. Consequently, this use of ethnic and religious violence against civilians resulted in the further fragmentation of Iraqi state and society.

The British Mandate and the Origins of Differential Access to the State

The British Mandate was an essential period in the history of modern Iraq to research in terms of understanding the origins of the state’s unequal treatment of citizens based on ethnic or religious status. Prominent historians have investigated the status of various ethnic and religious
communities, such as the Shia majority of Iraq, prior to the British occupation in order to more accurately realize the impact of this foreign intervention on Iraqi group identities and communal relations. In her research of the pre-modern provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul under the Ottoman Empire, historian Hallah Fattah investigated the concepts of individual and communal identity among Sunni and Shia communities under the jurisdiction of Ottoman officials prior to World War I. In Basra, for example, the concept of one’s individual identity was more fluid in comparison to that of contemporary Iraqi society, and was influenced by the region’s economic relationships with neighboring societies as well as with the ruling Ottoman administration. In 1907, the presence of merchants from India and the Persian Gulf caused Basra to become a prominent center of linguistic and cultural exchange.296 As a result, existing cultural elements indigenous to the province became fused with Arab and Indian influence, and a new identity took shape.297

In addition to economic influences, local religious authorities in Basra also made an impact on communal identity prior to the British occupation of the region. In 1908, the province was in the midst of a movement of large-scale conversions to Shi’ism due to the policies of the leading local families and members of the 'ulama in Najaf. These families hoped to consolidate this religious identity in order to resist the encroaching troops of Wahabi tribes from the Arabian Peninsula.298 What is most striking about this example is the level of fluidity and adaptability pertaining to a religious identity. This is different, as I have argued in this thesis, from the contemporary period in which Sunni, Shia and Kurdish identities have become so politicized and rigid that they are a major factor in the fragmentation of Iraqi state and society. Prior to the rise

297 Fattah, p. 113
298 Fattah, p. 117
of the Iraqi nation-state however, specifically the British-led nation-state, these identities did not
determine individuals’ multi-dimensional identities and appear not to have been reduced to the
only or most significant identity of individuals or groups.

In contrast to the substantial influence on culture and identity from foreign merchants and
prominent local powers at the start of the 20th century, the state was quite inactive in promoting a
specific identity as a political tool. Ottoman officials in Basra, while formally in charge of
government affairs in the region as part of the Ottoman Empire, largely only held influence at the
administrative level and enacted no policies to shape or enforce a government-sanctioned version
of communal identity that would reflect their culture and political interests. As a result, only the
landholding elite and merchant class spoke Turkish and assimilated to Ottoman culture, while the
countryside remained primarily unaffected by Ottoman presence and the associated culture failed
to permeate through the various layers of Basra society.299

This lack of a deliberate policy on the part of the Ottoman state with regard to identity
directly contrasts with government influence within this sphere under the British Mandate.
During this period, British officials exploited the existing practice of promoting members of the
Sunni landholding elite class into positions of political power and largely excluding the Shia
majority, officially legalizing the practice of differential access to the state based on one’s ethnic
or religious identity.300 In addition, choosing Faisal, a member of the Sunni aristocracy as the
first king of Iraq, served to cement this preferential treatment of the ruling Sunni elite. The state,
under the leadership of British officials such as Percy Cox, also engaged in anti-Shia rhetoric that
marginalized the majority of the population and gave them limited access to the state. This
government was the first in Iraq’s modern history to construct a national identity, particularly

299 Fattah, p. 114
one that suited their political and colonial expansionist goals, and enforce it on Iraqi society as a whole. At this point in Iraqi history, however, violence was not yet introduced as a routinely used tool to reinforce these constructed identities.

Saddam Hussein and the Use of Violence to Enforce National Identity

The divisive policies contrived by the British-controlled administration during the Mandate Period had long-lasting affects on the interaction between the Iraqi state and its civilians. As the Ba’ath Party rose to power, prominent officials including Saddam Hussein supported lofty, romantic rhetoric stressing unity, socialism and nationalism. The Party was knowledgeable and deeply critical of these prejudiced policies that had become rooted in the Iraqi state during the British Mandate, calling for an abandonment of such policies and the establishment of an independent, unified state that practiced equality among all its citizens. However, the Party’s actions, particularly those under Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship, contradicted the official political discourse. Hussein departed from the Ba’ath Party’s official stance on unity and redefined the concept of Iraqi identity based on exclusionary principles and reinforced this new interpretation with violence.

One of the first and most powerful alterations to the concept of Iraqi national identity was the equation of Ba’athi identity with national identity. By incorporating the ideologies of the ruling regime regarding national identity into official discourse, the Party legitimized its control over the government and criminalized those who rejected the Ba’ath Party not only as an enemy of the state, but of Iraq as a whole. One of the first groups of citizens to feel the repercussions of

---

these policies were the members (alleged or real) of rival political parties, which had been made illegal. Party officials demonized such individuals in the public sphere as enemies of the state as a means to legitimize kidnapping, arrest without charge, torture, and incarceration. In order to deter other citizens from questioning or rejecting the authority of the regime, Hussein also frequently used fear and violence as political tools. For example, alleged enemies of the Party were kidnapped from their homes in the middle of the night, moved to secret prisons, and would often be found dead in various locations with evidence of torture and disfigurement.  

Hussein’s use of violence to enforce his interpretation of national identity, specifically one that maximized his power, was perhaps most obvious in the context of his treatment of Kurdish Iraqis during the Iran-Iraq War. During this eight-year war that was devastating to both countries in terms of loss of capital and human lives, Hussein relied heavily on nationalist discourse to portray the Iranians as enemies, or an “other” group, and rally Iraqi support for the war. In his speeches, for example, he referred to all Iraqis as Arabs and Iranians as Persian in order emphasize an ethnic distinction between the two nations and by association, a more subtle religious distinction between the largely Sunni ruling class in Iraq and Khomeini’s Shia theocratic state.  

This discourse had negative consequence for two communities in Iraq; Kurdish and Shia citizens. Although Hussein had stressed that the Kurds could be considered Arab under the banner of Iraqi unity in his previous speeches, their inability to conform to the new narrow and rigid standards of Iraqi identity by belonging to a separate ethnic group made them a primary target for the regime. In 1988, during the most violent episodes of the Iran-Iraq war, Hussein committed acts of genocide against the Kurdish community and justified his actions through the veneer of national defense. During the Anfal Campaign, the regime

302 Congress, p. 6
destroyed entire Kurdish villages, relegated citizens to concentration camps, and subjected men, women and children to chemical attacks. Rather than hiding these actions from the public, Ba’athi officials such as Ali al-Majid demonized the Kurds as foreign enemies of Iraq and collaborators with Iran in order to justify their actions.\textsuperscript{304}

Just as the Kurds were targeted because of their ethnic identity, Shia citizens were subjected to large-scale acts of violence because the regime constructed them as unable to embody the increasingly rigid concept of Iraqi nationalism and national identity. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, residents of Basra, affected by the violence and chaos caused by the invasion and encouraged by the United States, rose up against the regime and attempted to overthrow Hussein. The dictator’s retaliation reflected a strategically engineered political discourse designed to delegitimize their grievances and portray them as traitors and sympathizers of Iran.\textsuperscript{305} The term for these uprisings in official discourse, the “Shia uprisings”, is in itself a hate narrative because it reduces these demonstrations against a repressive regime as an unjustified act armed rebellion by a select group of citizens. In addition, labeling the uprisings as pertaining to a specific religious group also insinuates that religious ideology was the principle motivation for the actions of these Iraqis. In this situation, excessive violence and political marginalization, rather than religious identity, were the main reasons behind the uprisings. Overall, the main development during this period towards ethnic and religious violence among civilians was the addition of state-sponsored violence towards civilians as a tool for reinforcing a particular concept of Iraqi identity that tried to divide and rule different groups of Iraqis and bolster the power of the regime.

\textsuperscript{304} Middle East Watch. \textit{Human Rights in Iraq}. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. P. 6
\textsuperscript{305} Middle East Watch. p. 45
The U.S. Occupation and its Contribution to Sectarian Violence

The U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq completely altered the country’s political landscape and infrastructure in addition to having far-reaching adverse effects on social fragmentation and the rise of communal violence. Prior to this invasion, Iraq had suffered for over a decade under harsh UN sanctions, bringing the economy to the verge of collapse while the population still suffered under a despotic ruler.\footnote{Gonzalez, Nathan. \textit{The Sunni-Shia Conflict: Understanding Sectarian Violence in the Middle East}. Mission Viejo, CA: Nortia, 2009. p. 101} In a poorly planned effort to overthrow Hussein’s regime, the U.S.-led Coalition left Iraq with a power vacuum and an increase in organized crime from violent militias due to the complete lack of security forces to restore law and order. During this period of instability, political factions emerged around opportunistic leaders who mobilized the identity-groups to which they belonged to gain power for themselves. These leaders were often encouraged, or even repatriated by the United States. After establishing power, these leaders organized militias that committed large-scale violence against civilians, making Iraqi civilians the perpetrators as well as the victims of sectarian violence.

In addition to leaving the country in this precarious state, the U.S. continued to make enormous strategic and military blunders that only increased the power of militias such as the Mahdi Army and al-Qaeda and resulted in full-scale sectarian violence throughout Iraq. Although ethnic and religious tensions among Iraq’s diverse communities certainly existed prior to this period, as we have seen in Chapter One and Chapter Two, the domination of such militias across the country and the civilian participation in large-scale acts of violence against citizens of a different ethnic or religious background is seen nowhere else in the history of modern Iraq.
Therefore, while the actions of the United States in Iraq were not the only contributing factor to the rise of sectarian violence in Iraq, they nevertheless served as the main catalyst for the fragmentation of Iraqi state and society along sectarian lines.

The U.S.-led Coalition committed several key errors that contributed to the rise of sectarian militias and the subsequent escalation of sectarian violence among Iraqi civilians. The first major misstep was the failure to gain the Iraqi population’s support and confidence that their forces could successfully maintain stability throughout the occupation. Iraqi society’s lack of trust and confidence towards U.S. forces began in the Gulf War when civilians were encouraged to overthrow Hussein during the uprisings in Basra, but then received no aid from the U.S. military and were completely devastated by the intense violence that ensued from the dictator’s retaliation. In 2003, the U.S. failed once again to gain the population’s trust by its inability to control the looting, violence and lawlessness that ensued following the toppling of the Ba’ath Party’s regime. In addition, strategic miscalculations such as de-Ba’athification and the dissolution of the Iraqi army alienated an entire educated class of Iraqis with in-depth knowledge of government functions from participating in the new administration, many of whom were left with few options for earning a livelihood than to join one of the emerging militias. These militias, in turn, gained support from many Iraqi civilians even if they did not subscribe to their violent tactics because they provided security and relative stability in some neighborhoods where US forces not been able to do so. The leaders of these militias, as well as corrupt politicians working within the new administration, reveal Iraqi agency in politicizing sectarian identities through the use of violence. Thus, while the United States forces created a power vacuum by

---

308 Kukis, p. 21
removing Saddam Hussein, several Iraqi political and military leaders acted as opportunists and exploited this political instability to their own advantage.

Analysis: The Development of Sectarian Violence and Suggestions for the Future of Communal Relations in Iraq

The use of violence among civilian groups of varying ethnic and religious backgrounds developed in three main phases throughout the history of modern Iraq. Under the British Mandate, British officers and King Faisal I introduced a system of differential access to the state by favoring Sunni Iraqis in government practice as well as in the Constitution over their non-Sunni counterparts. This Sunni favoritism and subsequent marginalization of other communities, such as the Shia majority, became encapsulated into part of Iraq’s national identity and was continually supported by the state. Under Saddam Hussein, the Ba’ath Party, despite lofty rhetoric of equality for all Iraqi citizens, perpetuated the trend of Sunni dominance to suit its political goals and introduced large-scale violence against civilians to reinforce its reinterpreted concept of identity as one of its main political tools. Finally, during the U.S. occupation beginning in 2003, the breakdown of the state and the actions of violent militia groups marked the transition of the use of large-scale violence to divide and rule identity groups from state to non-state civilian hands and seriously harmed communal relations throughout the country. State-sponsored favoritism under the Mandate, the large-scale violence used by Saddam Hussein, and the outbreak of sectarian violence due to the failures of the US Occupation were all essential in producing the state of severe fragmentation of Iraqi state and society that exists today.
The breakdown of inter-societal relations and the intensification of acts of violence against civilians based on ethnic and religious identity in Iraq has been a development nearly one hundred years in the making; likewise, implementing successful and long-lasting solutions will likely require years of effort on both the state and community level. On the state level, the Iraqi administration faces the task of reevaluating quota systems and sectarian-leaning political parties that reduce the political process to one’s ethnic or religious background and encourage citizens to vote according to these identities for fear of being marginalized in the political sphere. The government must also address the infiltration of specific branches and ministries by militia groups and reestablish security in all of its divisions.\footnote{Clarke, Henry L. "Reconstructing Iraq's Provinces, One by One." \textit{Joint Forces Quarterly} 52 (2009): 141-47. P. 142} In addition, both the state and community must make efforts towards reestablishing the population’s confidence in the ruling administration to successfully provide social welfare programs and maintain security over the country, including its international borders and local neighborhoods. After demobilizing the militias, the government must implement successful measures towards integrating ex-militia men into Iraq state and society.\footnote{Schwartz, Anthony J. "Iraq's Militias: The True Threat to Coalition Success in Iraq." \textit{Parameters} (2007): 55-71. P. 65} If these issues are addressed, the bulk of the militias’ power will be diminished, and Iraq may begin the process of improving relations among its population and make amendments to the ruling administration to reflect principles of equality for all Iraqi citizens. These improvements will not alter popular mindsets and distrust immediately, but reform at the state level is essential to any other efforts at post-conflict social reconstruction and moral repair.
Works Cited


The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed. | 2011


Ferguson, Charles, dir. *No End In Sight*. Magnolia Films. 2007. DVD.


Institute, 1978.


The Manchester Guardian. Oct 12, 1922


McDonald, Michelle. *The Kiss of Saddam*. St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland, 2009.


