The Role of Conflict in Shaping Iraqi Identity

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Abstract

This thesis shows how four sources of conflict have been particularly divisive to Iraqi identity: sectarian legacies, ethnic tensions, internal political conflict, and foreign involvement and intervention. This thesis examines how these four sources of conflict have shaped Iraqi identity, or prevented it from forming, and how this shows up in its society and politics affecting Iraq’s ability to function as a country.

Iraq from its very beginning as Mesopotamia has a long history of conflict, some of which was extremely violent. The inhabitants of Mesopotamia built advanced civilizations, established writing, law, and made advances in the sciences and mathematics. Despite these advances, their civilization was completely demolished by invading forces on multiple occasions continuing through to present day Iraq. Iraq has plentiful oil resources, water, agriculture, and an educated population, yet Iraq struggles to prosper because of the poor decisions of its leaders, wars, corruption, and internal conflicts.

This research is based on first-hand accounts of Iraqi exiles and refugees I interviewed. I located ten individuals to interview through friends and associates, as well as through institutions that help Iraqi refugees settle in the U.S. and that raise awareness of the Kurdish situation. These individuals are from different places in Iraq. One individual still lives in southern Iraq and is working to restore a sense of hope to the country. Many of these individuals left Iraq after 2003, and a few of those who departed earlier went back to work in Iraq after Saddam Hussein’s fall. A few of these individuals
continue their work on improving Iraq and make frequent trips back. I asked these individuals questions about their experiences living in Iraq, what they saw and how they feel it affected Iraqi identity and society. I asked them if Iraq has an identity, what they believe that identity is, and what they believe are the problems facing the formation of an Iraqi identity. I also asked them what they think the future of their country is. I obtained the consent of those I interviewed to use their insights and stories for my study and withheld their last names to protect their identities. I also used secondary sources in order to provide context and background for the stories of some of my subjects and to further explain the effects of conflict on identity.

The insights provided by these interviews leads me to conclude that conflict has had a significant impact on identity in Iraq. The deep distrust among the people following years of conflict, violence, inequality, and discrimination is keeping them from working together and instead is pulling the different ethnic and sectarian groups apart. Because of all this conflict, Iraqis are unable to form a trust and devotion to their country that in turn would help them to form a national identity. Instead many Iraqis have lost hope and remain divided along their ethnic and sectarian lines that could lead to Iraq being divided into three federalisms.
Table of Contents

List of Tables ........................................................................................................vi

I. Introduction ........................................................................................................1

II. Legacy of Violence and Destruction ................................................................. 9

III. Sectarian Conflict ..........................................................................................17

IV. Ethnic Conflict ...............................................................................................30

V. Foreign Influence and Intervention ..................................................................40

VI. Internal Political Conflict ...............................................................................51

VII. Summary and Conclusion .............................................................................71

VIII. Bibliography ................................................................................................73
List of Tables

Table 1  Mesopotamia/Iraq Timeline. ................................. vii
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>Persian Sasanian Empire established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>650</td>
<td>Arab Islamic Conquest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>656-750</td>
<td>Shi’a/Sunni conflict over rightful leader of Islam; incessant uprisings, assassinations, and coups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750-751</td>
<td>Abbasid dynasty established at Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1256-1258</td>
<td>Grandson of Genghis Khan, Hulagu Khan demolishes Baghdad and lays waste to greater Mesopotamia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300</td>
<td>Black Death wipes out whole villages and sections of cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1393 and 1401</td>
<td>Timur the Lame aka Tamerlane terrorizes Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1534</td>
<td>Mesopotamia becomes part of newly established Ottoman Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Iraq founded October 1. Becomes a British mandate in 1920. A series of rebellions and revolts followed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Iraq gains independence October 3. A series of coups take place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Overthrow of the monarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Baathist revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Saddam Hussein becomes Iraqi dictator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1988</td>
<td>Iran/Iraq War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1991</td>
<td>Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, Persian Gulf War follows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-1994</td>
<td>UN sanctions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-Present</td>
<td>Terrorist group Al-Qaida in Iraq/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant occupies Iraq and Syria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 Table adapted from The British Museum Website, *Mesopotamia Timeline*, www.mesopotamia.co.uk/time/explore/frame_mes.html, with additional dates from Edwin Black’s *Banking on Baghdad*. 
Introduction

Korwan, a Kurd from Kirkuk who was put in prison with his family during Saddam’s Anfal Campaign in 1988, described Iraq as a dysfunctional family living in a house in which the mother is trying to take power for herself, the father for himself, and the children for themselves. In their history, there is some hurt. The father said or did something that injured the mother’s feelings during their courtship, and the mother returned with her own hurtful response. Despite this, the arranged marriage still happens, and the children have joined in this cycle of continuing the hurt and the conflict. There is no trust left in the house, and everyone is working for their own benefit. If they each continue to try their own way and push against each other, perhaps they will lose their house and will be on the street where they will have to struggle more to have less. If they would come together, regardless of their differences, and be united, there would be room for everyone.\(^2\)

The effect of conflict on Iraqi identity is like the household described by Korwan. Throughout Iraq’s history, including some of its pre-history as Mesopotamia, there has been conflict, which has perpetuated a cycle of violence, discrimination, and distrust. This cycle has left deep divides between the groups of people who call Iraq home, as well as between the people and their leaders and between foreigners and Iraqis. It has left everyone in the house in their own room, with their own identity instead of forging a unified, national identity. It has complicated the question of identity in Iraq and has no

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\(^2\) Korwan, interviewed by author, Manassas Park, VA, February 5, 2016.
simple answer. Depending on the person asked, where in Iraq they grew up, what they experienced as an individual and as a sectarian or ethnic group, and their confidence in their hope for Iraq, each person will give a different answer.

Noor is a Sunni Muslim who grew up in Baghdad and was attending college when the 2003 U.S. invasion took place. Her answer when asked about Iraqi identity provides insight into the complication of the issue and potentially shows the misunderstanding of what it means to have a national identity. She said, “I would say Iraq has a national identity but definitely not one because the Kurds have one, it’s like a melting pot but it hasn’t been sorted or coming down to one face because people are still too proud each of their identity that so far, we don’t have one voice that says I am Iraqi. We have the Shi’i voice, the Sunni voice, and now even the Christian voice.”

So, what is identity? Why is identity important to a country? What is nationalism? What are the factors that have helped or prevented Iraq from forming a sense of nationalism and a national identity? “In sociology, identity is related to self-awareness and self-consciousness, which lead to cultural norms and group identities. Within politics, it is seen as a search to reconcile concepts of nation and communal identities.” Identities are formed through different experiences, histories, and traits.

Nations and people have multiple identities. Religion, family, ethnicity, race, profession, and political affiliations are all identities that make up a person and groups in society. It is important to have something that is able to bring these different identities together for the betterment of the country. Nationalism is defined as, “loyalty and

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3 Noor, interviewed by author, Woodbridge, VA, December 30, 2015.

devotion to a nation; a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups."\(^5\) Anthony D. Smith’s definition as quoted by Liora Lukitz clarifies the difference between nationalism and national identity. He states, "Nationalism is the doctrine that makes the nation the object of every political endeavor and it is a political reaction to an external presence, whereas national identity refers to the collective self-image of the members of a national unit and to their distinctive cultural system, shared by the majority of the population."\(^6\) (Italics in the original)

Iraqis do not have a sense of nationalism and national identity, as defined. Rather Iraqis place greater emphasis on their family and tribe, religious, and political affiliations than to Iraq. Iraqis have a love of their country, a pride in their glorious history as ancient Mesopotamia who brought the world writing, science, and law. However, Iraq is a twentieth century creation by Western powers who were seeking after their own interests. Mesopotamia described the region surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and was never its own country. At times this region fell under foreign governance and was therefore brought into an existing country, but the Mesopotamian people had not governed Mesopotamian as its own country. The people who lived in this region had fought against each other and had not worked together as a country or shared responsibilities for governance. Therefore, when the British created Iraq in 1921, it


forced these distinctly different and already divided groups of people together into one country, and to try to create a national identity despite their vast differences.

Iraq is less than a hundred years old, and has been in almost constant conflict since its creation. This continual conflict has not allowed the people of Iraq to form a trust in and a devotion to their country. Based on interviews of Iraqis who live in the United States and one who lives in Iraq, many have lost hope in their country’s ability to provide a stable and safe life for them and their families. Many have left to find a better life elsewhere.

When there is a lack of national identity or when the national identity promotes the exclusion of certain sub-identities, it leaves open the possibility of division within societies. As these sub-identities or out-groups are considered different, strange, and unaccepted by the in-group, it becomes easy to make justifications for treating the out-group differently, to dehumanize and inflict injustices and violence on the out-group. These actions can lead to further sub-identities of victim and abuser, and sentiments of distrust and fear that perpetuates conflict and division between the different groups in that society. Economist and philosopher, Amartya Sen points out that, “The advocacy of a unique identity for violent purpose takes the form of separating out one identity group – directly linked to the violent purpose at hand – for special focus, and it proceeds from there to eclipse the relevance of other associations through selective emphasis and incitement… The artificial diminution of human beings into singular identities can have divisive effects, making the world potentially much more incendiary.”

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This is one of the factors preventing Iraq from forming a national identity. There has been a tendency throughout Iraq’s history for foreign occupiers and the political elite to focus on certain groups within the society and exclude others. Iraq is a diverse country with different religious and ethnic groups. According to the 2014 CIA World Factbook Iraq is 60%-65% Shi’i, 32%-37% Sunni, .8% Christian, less than .1% Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish or unaffiliated, and is 75%-80% Arab, 15%-20% Kurdish, with 5% Turkoman, Assyrian, or other ethnic group. This diversity is a part of what makes Iraq interesting. However, instead of creating an identity that unifies and utilizes this diversity, the political leaders of Iraq and foreign occupiers have abused this diversity through their creation of policies and actions that furthered inequality and discrimination.

Conflict has existed in Iraq since its creation as a modern state. When asked about conflict in Iraq and how it affected Iraqi identity Noor said, “I think because the culture of Iraq has been to be in constant war, that we have this embedded in our culture that if there is no war, there is no peace. Like we are always in constant conflict.” She also said, “You don’t know how to live without war. You’re in constant survival mode. You use people to get gain. You mask who you are and your problems. You look for reasons to validate your distrust.”

The conflict that has been the most divisive to the country, and has impacted Iraq’s identity the most, has come from four main sources: foreign influence and involvement in Iraq, internal political conflict, ethnic tensions, and sectarian legacies.

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9 Noor, interviewed by author, Woodbridge, VA, December 30, 2015.

10 Noor, interviewed by author, Ft Belvoir, VA, February 17, 2015.
One or more of these sources of conflict has existed throughout Iraq’s short history as a nation-state. Instead of fostering a unified Iraqi identity that includes all cultures and backgrounds, they have instilled separate, distinct group identities of Shi’i, Sunni, Christian, Arab, Kurd, Assyrian, etc., that break down into other identities of victim and victimizer, and creates sentiments of fear and mistrust as the conflicts continue.

Sherko Kirmanj, an author on several books on conflict and identity in Iraq, points out that national identity is so critical because it defines the individual loyalty to the nation-state, but in the case of Iraq instead of unifying Iraqis it contributes to the continuation of the ethnic and sectarian tensions. He says for Iraq, “It is also important because it means that any attempt to forge – or force – a national identity may have political consequences, such as the need to redraw geopolitical boundaries or alter the composition of political regimes and states. To keep order and peace in the world and to develop loyalty to one’s state, it is important for the state to be perceived as legitimate and be able to develop a sense of belonging among its citizens.”11

Political scientist Harith Al-Qarawee believes a collective narrative is needed in Iraq to mobilize the people and that collective narrative uses myths, symbols, and memories. He writes, “The collective narrative is defined as ‘a meaningful connection between the past, present and future, which is often coupled with a reference of action’.

It is a mental construct which tells the story of a human group, highlighting what brought its members together, what makes it succeed or fail, what keeps it united, and what

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threatens its existence.”\(^\text{12}\) (Italics in original) Al-Qarawee notes the collective narrative provides a group the reason for its “groupness”.

Therefore, to understand Iraq it is important to look at its history, and see how the many years of conflict that has existed throughout Iraq’s history, including some of its pre-history as Mesopotamia, has affected the mentality of its society. At times this conflict was particularly brutal and violent, and left Mesopotamia completely destroyed and under foreign rule. Sometimes the conflict was subtler such as real or perceived injustices from the ruling parties and the political elites, or the rule by a neglectful foreign power. Mesopotamia was the cradle of civilization, the inventors of writing, law, and they made great advancements in the arts and sciences. Now they cannot produce anything, and the majority of the Iraqi population have to struggle to survive. This leads them to focus on their own needs and the needs of their family rather than developing a devotion to their country.

Iraqis still find pride in the Mesopotamian heritage. When asked about the influence of Iraq’s past on Iraqis Noor said “Iraqis are so stuck in the past. We praise the past, and ignore our present even though we were miserable in the past. Iraq really is a beautiful country. I think because of the diverse culture and the good people who have lived a hard life. I just cannot imagine how we went from a culture where writing was invented to now which is like living in the dark ages.”\(^\text{13}\)

Yousuf is a Sunni Kurd from Kirkuk who worked for the U.S. Army after the 2003 invasion. In 2012, he worked with the Kurdistan regional government in their

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\(^\text{13}\) Noor, interviewed by author, Woodbridge, VA, December 30, 2015.
relation’s office. He said, “Iraqis have Facebook pages that show how great Iraq was back in the day. They live in fantasy. What am I going to do with a civilization that existed 2,000 years ago and right now I don’t have electricity. It doesn’t mean anything to me, to my family.” He further stated, “There is not one needle or shoe produced in Iraq. Everything is imported. We had agriculture, tourism, and nice airports. We had everything, and now, nothing. This applies from Kurdistan all the way down to Basra, to the last province.”

What happened to Iraq? How did it go from being the cradle of civilization to not being able to produce anything? Is it because Iraq’s collective narrative is one of conflict, war, corruption, inequality, discrimination, injustices, and violence?

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Chapter 1

Legacy of Violence and Destruction

Iraq’s history of violence and conflict begins in its ancient history as Mesopotamia. Like many countries, the Mesopotamian region’s history is filled with war. However, war and perpetual conflict that existed throughout its history continues to impact and influence Iraq today. The people of Mesopotamia survived some particularly devastating destruction from which it was not able to fully recover, and has struggled to return to the thriving trade and industries that once existed. People and societies are shaped by their history and experiences, and how they responded to the hardships inflicted on them. These wars and the violence inflicted on the people by invading armies, as well as the violence each group inflicted on the other continues to foster distrust that stunts the ability of Iraqis to come together and work together to form a national identity.

Because the land of Mesopotamia includes the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers it had water, a scarce resource in the Middle East, which allowed them to build up their agriculture, trade, and industry. The city of Babylon was known for its beauty. It was a center of learning and creativity. Mesopotamia was also a crossroad between Europe and Asia, which brought many people and cultures through its lands. Saddam Hussein looked back to this history of greatness and tried to make it part of Iraq’s identity. While this was done mostly for his own benefit to tie himself to the great conquerors, Nebuchadnezzar and Saladin, of ancient times, it brought this history to the minds of the
people. In the 1980s, Saddam had the Gates of Ishtar and the great, ancient conqueror Nebuchadnezzar’s palace rebuilt.\textsuperscript{15} He, along with artists and poets who drew on this heritage, showed the greatness of Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{16}

It is also these resources and its greatness that made Mesopotamia appealing to invaders. Author and journalist Edwin Black points out that, “Babylon was too opulent a prize for coexistence… Mesopotamia was incessantly catapulted to heights of splendor only to careen back to depths of slaughter” as it was alternately passed between Greeks, Romans, and Persians.\textsuperscript{17}

The Islamic Conquest in 636 CE and its subsequent division into the Shi’i and Sunni sects added to the conflict in Mesopotamia. The atrocities and violence committed by each group over the other, and the inequalities that existed between the groups fostered a deep distrust and unwillingness to work together that continues to impact Iraqi society and politics. When asked about the tensions between Sunni and Shi’i, Korwan talked about the current political situation and the change from a Sunni dominated government to a Shi’i dominated government. He said, “Because the Sunnis are no longer in power, they don’t want to see a prosperous Iraq right now because the state is no longer under their control. Since the beginning, Sunnis were on top of everyone, Shi’i and Kurd so they were pro centralization but now they will try to break the country down because it’s no longer theirs.” Of the Shi’i, he talked about how the Shi’i majority in Iraq are trying to keep the country together by force, like Saddam had done. They are trying


to have influence and control over everyone. He said the effects of this is a divided community, there is no trust in the community now. People do not believe what the other is saying. Instead people accuse you of working for your own interests, and he feels they are working for their own interests, so the lack of trust is the first sign of division and it is going to break everything down.\(^\text{18}\)

Mesopotamia fell under the control of the Persians and then the Ottoman Empire in 1534. Mesopotamia remained under Ottoman control, but the Persians and Ottomans fought over it until approximately 1818. These wars increased Sunni suspicions of Shi’i loyalty to Iran.\(^\text{19}\)

According to Alexander Wendt, a political scientist, “The greater the degree of conflict in a system, the more the states will fear each other and defend egoistic identities by engaging in relative gains thinking and resisting the factors that might undermine it. The ability of states to create new worlds in the future depends on the old ones they created in the past.”\(^\text{20}\) Just as the societies in Mesopotamia’s past were divided and filled with atrocities, violence, and conflict, Iraq’s present and future seem to be following the same pattern. Iraq remains divided into Shi’i, Sunni, Arab, and Kurdish identities instead of having an Iraqi identity.

When the British created Iraq from three provinces of the collapsed Ottoman Empire in 1921, they did not take into account this history, the distrust between the groups, or how deeply divided these groups were. Under the Ottomans, the three

\(^{18}\) Korwan, interviewed by author, Manassas Park, VA, February 5, 2016.


provinces Mosul, Basra, and Baghdad operated independent of each other. Mosul province is predominately Kurdish, Baghdad Sunni, and Basra Shi’i. The British did not understand how hard it would be to bring these people together and form one society out of the distinctly different identities and cultures that existed.

The British began taking territory in Iraq in 1914, when war broke out between the British and the Ottoman Empire. The British captured Basra to protect their strategic interests and communications and oil fields at the head of the Gulf.\(^{21}\) By the end of 1918, the British also captured Baghdad and Mosul provinces. Mosul was originally going to be given to the French but when the British discovered its abundant oil resources they kept it. The British also recognized the strategic location of Iraq for air bases, and its agricultural resources that could help feed the British military.\(^{22}\)

Reaction to the British occupation varied throughout the provinces; some accepted it because of commerce, and some wanted to see the end of Ottoman rule but were weary of their new occupiers. In the case of the Kurds, at the beginning they felt the British could possibly help them gain autonomy. However, the majority wanted independence from foreign rule and resistance began to appear. In 1920, uprisings began in the mid-Euphrates that quickly spread to the lower Euphrates. This revolt encouraged the Kurds in the north who also rose up. There was no coordination between the groups and within a month the movement started to wane. The tribal sheikhs, who had extensive land holdings that were recognized by the British, were unwilling to jeopardize their status and actually worked against the rebellion. The 1920 revolt was not organized and


could not withstand the strength of the British military. Approximately 6,000 Iraqis and 500 British and Indian soldiers died in this revolt.\textsuperscript{23}

Through the League of Nations, Iraq was made a mandate under British administration in 1920. Professor and author Adeed Dawisha mentions that the British had to set up a government that would allow them to retain enough political authority to check unacceptable policies and decisions. They understood the importance of choosing someone from Iraq’s inhabitants but they also recognized that a local candidate would not receive universal support. In the end, they chose Faisal from the aristocratic Hejazi family in what would come to be known as Saudi Arabia. He had the qualifications and was the King of Syria until the French expelled him. However, he was not widely accepted by the Iraqi people. The Shi’is and Kurds, especially, did not approve of being ruled over by a non-Iraqi Sunni sovereign. In an election designed to guarantee Faisal’s approval, he won and assumed the throne in August 1921.\textsuperscript{24}

Phebe Marr points out that, “The British developed an impressive array of institutions – a monarchy, a parliament, Western-style constitution, a bureaucracy and an army. The bureaucracy and the army – both of which predated the British – remained after they departed, but the monarchy and the Western-style democratic institutions were swept away after 1958.”\textsuperscript{25}

Despite these beginnings, Iraqis have attempted to form a national identity. However, some of the factors that prevented them from forming a national identity are

\textsuperscript{23} Charles Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 31-34, 43-44.


\textsuperscript{25} Marr, \textit{The Modern History of Iraq}, 21.
some of the same factors that still exist in Iraq today. Among the significant factors include the power hungry political elite, the distrust between the different sectarian and ethnic groups, the party in power focusing on the needs of their group while neglecting the needs and interests of others, and the conflict that arises as a result of each of these factors. Though Sunnis dominated the government until 2003, there was some representation of Shi’is and Kurds. However, the distrust between the different groups did not allow them to agree on what that identity should be. The belief that policies would benefit only the group putting forth that policy as had been demonstrated in the past created fears of favoritism and prejudice. Iraq’s parliament went through many changes in Iraq’s early days as the people became upset or disenchanted with the government of the day.

King Faisal understood the importance of a national identity and how monumental a task it was going to be to bring these people together. Adeed Dawisha quotes a memorandum in which Faisal wrote,

There is still – and I say this with a heart full of sorrow – no Iraqi people but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatever. Out of these masses we want to fashion a people which we would train, educate and refine… The circumstances, being what they are, the immenseness of the effort needed for this [can only be imagined].

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King Faisal faced many obstacles to forming a national identity. Not only were there the divides between Shi’i and Sunni, Arab and Kurd, there were also disparities in culture and economics that overlapped with the ethnic and sectarian divides. Adeed Dawisha points out that, “Of the rural population, much of which was abjectly poor and illiterate, 65 percent was Shi’ite and only 16 percent was Arab Sunni. These communal divisions would prove to be some of the most obstinate hurdles to social and political integration in Iraq during the first decade and a half of the country’s life, and even beyond.”

At times during the 1920s-30s, the different groups united in a common goal such as getting the British out of Iraq, and gaining independence, from which a national identity tried to emerge. However, this unity was generally weak and once the goal was completed, it was unable to survive the waves of Arab nationalist sentiment and calls for Kurdish autonomy.

Alexander Wendt notes that, “The ability to overcome collective action problems depends in part on whether actors’ social identities generate self-interests or collective interests.” Continual conflict creates a need and a desire to survive, which looks after self and not community. It creates perceptions of in-group and other, which continues to keep society divided into groups according to their shared hardships and experiences. Given the desire of each of the different groups in Iraq to survive and pursue their political interests, it is not surprising they have not been unable to overcome the collective action problem.

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29 Wendt, *Collective Identity*, 386.
In less than a hundred years, the four sources of conflict mentioned previously: sectarian legacies, ethnic tensions, foreign influence and involvement, and internal political conflict, have created deep-rooted distrust between the different religious groups, between the leaders and the people, between foreigners and Iraqis, and between the different ethnic groups. These sources of conflict have played a key role in preventing the formation of a unified Iraqi identity.
Chapter 2
Sectarian Legacies

Though the ethnic and sectarian conflicts comprise two different sources of conflict, each with their own effects on Iraqi identity, there is much overlap and similarities between the two. Based on interviews of Iraqis in the Washington D.C area, in people’s daily interactions these sources of conflict do not necessarily manifest themselves, but within the affairs of the government and its policies, they are more pronounced. Despite this there have been long periods of coexistence between the Shi’is and Sunnis in Iraq, but as conflict within Iraq increased so too did the tensions between the different groups. Memories of past atrocities were brought back to light, and sentiments of unfairness and injustice increased widening the divide between the Shi’is and Sunnis.

Author Fanar Haddad talks about chosen traumas and defines them as, “The collective memory of a disaster that befell a group; far more than a simple recollection, it also involves myth and sanctification and, as with the renewal of symbols described above, chosen traumas can lie dormant only to be awoken and slightly altered to fit the needs of the day.” He points out that in the post-2003 political environment Sunnis who had always held political dominance were made to feel their minority status, which they had not experienced before despite their numerical minority status. In response to this Sunnis developed a wider array of symbols, traumas and glories. With the Shi‘i gaining control of the government, they saw this as an opportunity to right perceived wrongs.
This environment brought back past traumas that carry with them memories of loss, and feelings of “humiliation, vengeance, and hatred that trigger a variety of unconscious defense mechanisms that attempt to reverse these experiences and feelings.”

Sectarian conflict originates from the confusion over who should be the rightful leader of Islam after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. This confusion has sparked incredible violence between the groups that developed from the schism within Islam and has embedded deep distrust and suspicion between the two groups that continues today. The Shi’is, as they would come to be called, believed the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali was the rightful successor. However, three men were chosen before Ali and the murder of Ali’s predecessor, Uthman, tainted Ali’s caliphate. Uthman was brutally stabbed by men from the southern Mesopotamian towns of Basra and Kufa who followed Ali and had felt humiliated and exploited by those Uthman had chosen to be governors. When Ali was challenged to avenge Uthman’s death, a war between Ali’s army and the governor of Damascus, Muawiya’s forces broke out which caused further confusion and conflict within the Muslim community. Ali was assassinated and Muawiya assumed the caliphate. The Sunnis accepted Muawiya while the group that would later be known as Shi’is did not.

The Sunnis believe a successor is chosen by the Muslim community, while Shi’is believe he must be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Fights between the different groups broke out and as atrocities were committed by each group on the other, sentiments

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and the identity of victimhood became prominent. One such fight is the battle of Karbala which occurred in 680. Hussein, the son of Ali and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was traveling to Kufa but was stopped in Karbala by the ruling Sunni Umayyad forces which surrounded Hussein’s group of 100, to include some of Hussein’s family, and subsequently killed all of them. Only Hussein’s son Ali escaped. Professor of Middle Eastern Studies, Fouad Ajami writes that, Imam Hussein’s head was cut off, his body trampled by horses, and his head carried back to the ruler’s court in Damascus.33

This day became an important day for the Shi’is and is a day of mourning for them. Every year they have processions and perform reenactments of the events that occurred at Karbala. The celebration is known as Ashura and brings Shi’is from Iran and all over to Karbala every year in pilgrimage to the holy site. However, under the Baath party, tighter controls and restrictions were placed on Shi‘i rituals and Iranians were banned from making pilgrimages to Najaf and Karbala, the two Shi‘i holy sites.34

Hassan, a Shi‘i from southern Iraq who fought in the 1991 uprisings against Saddam, said “Saddam won’t let us express anything through our customs, habits, or anything. He killed all religious people, killed most of the people, so that’s why most of the people who rebelled in 1991 were Shi‘is.”35

While the Shi‘is have generally taken the brunt of Sunni discrimination and brutality, they are not completely innocent and have their own share of atrocities. Edwin Black writes, “Words cannot adequately describe the almost perpetual tragedy inflicted

35 Hassan, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015.
upon, and inflicted by, the Moslems and Mesopotamia during the five centuries following
the ouster of the Umayyads… Unspeakable carnage was exchanged between neighboring
empires, between Islamic factions and allies… Treachery and extermination, rape and
plunder, mass enslavement, and a penchant for outdoing previous cruelty and
humiliations regularly plagued the realm between the two rivers.” He mentions the first
caliph of the Abbasid dynasty who relocated the capital to the Shi’i city of Najaf, and
killed all the remaining Sunni Umayyads.36 It is this sort of history that plays into Iraqi
politics and the reason neither the Shi`i nor the Sunni trusts the other to fairly govern over
them. Even into modern day, both groups complain of unfairness and discrimination
committed by the other, which has created an identity of victim, and sentiments of
mistrust and revenge.

In his book, The Shia Revival, Vali Nasr points out that the sectarian divide is
more than a religious dispute from the early days of Islam but is a contemporary clash of
identities. “Faith and identity converge in this conflict, and their combined power goes a
long way toward explaining why, despite the periods of coexistence, the struggle has
lasted so long and retains such urgency and significance.” He states further, “Theological
and historical disagreements fuel it, but so do today’s concerns with power, subjugation,
freedom, and equality, not to mention regional conflicts and foreign intrigues. It is,
paradoxically, a very old, very modern conflict.37

Prior to 2003, this division between Shi`i and Sunni was felt more on the political
level, for the Shi`i through discrimination by Sunni political leaders, than it was on the

36 Black, Banking on Baghdad, 35-36.

personal level between neighbors and friends. When asked about the Shi’i and Sunni tensions, Ahmed, a Shi’i Muslim who was a sports doctor in Baghdad before he came to the United States in 2014, said, “There is no problem between them. Before 2003, I had friends all my life and didn’t know if they were Shi’i or Sunni. We didn’t ask, but after 2003 we ask. The Sunnis fight the government because the new government is Shi’i and they don’t give the Sunnis their right or what belongs to them. But, when I was in college, all my friends were Sunni and we all went out together, and ate together. There was no problem between us.”

Yousuf, expressed a similar sentiment. He said, “We never have issue because once you grow up with them, it’s like you get used to each other. When you come down to the level of people, things are not that complicated and really fixable. We have managers among all these sectarian religions. There is not really a lot of issues but at the level of politics, things get complicated and that’s where the issues are.”

While the sectarian divide was not as prevalent during the time of Saddam Hussein, it still existed in subtle ways. Yasir is a Shi’i Muslim who grew up in Baghdad. He worked for an environmental non-government organization in Iraq that worked on restoring Iraq’s marshlands. He remembers being a kid when his neighborhood was full of Christians and different Muslims. They would go out and there would be no problems, but his grandmother told him, “When you go to a Christian house, don’t eat with them because their food is not halal so it’s forbidden.” Yasir said, “I was just a kid, I had to mind.” So when he went to visit his friend, and his friend’s family brought out food, he

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38 Ahmed, interviewed by author, Alexandria, VA, November 9, 2015.

just remembers “I can’t eat that.” He said, “That’s one of the things that makes it hard. It’s just crazy. The culture needs more knowledge about what’s going on. It’s the misconceptions that make people hate each other.”

After the 2003 invasion and the installation of the new Shi’i dominated government, sectarian identity became more prominent. Shahnaz is a Sunni who was born and grew up in Iraq. She raised four daughters by herself after her husband was killed in a dispute after the Gulf War. She was a schoolteacher in Baghdad before and after the 2003 invasion. She said, “After the new government, the parents would come in the morning and bring the kids and give me instructions on how to handle the kids. They would say, ‘this is my daughter don’t let her sit besides these kids because I hate her mother.’ I have to balance between all the parents because some belong to the new government, and some to the old and they don’t want to communicate with each other.”

Noor tells of coming to the United States and being so happy when one of her Christian friends was also able to immigrate. One day Noor was taking her friend to some Iraqi stores to buy spices and at one shop her friend asked, “Is the shop owner one of our people?” Noor said, “It didn’t register. I was like yeah, he’s Iraqi,” and Noor’s friend said, “No, is he one of our people? Is he Christian? I think that popped my bubble because she is Christian and I am Muslim and we were so close. I never thought until she came to the States that she meant, one of my people, and I thought what do you mean? I’m Iraqi too. I’m one of your people and she said, no is the shop owner my people, is he

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40 Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.

41 Shahnaz, interviewed by author, Fort Belvoir, VA, May 23, 2015.
Christian because I want to know if he sells pork. I think I was hurt at first. How could she say is he one of ‘my people’?"\textsuperscript{42}

Yousuf talked about how different it is living in the U.S. compared with Iraq. He says, “Look at this country, Arabs, Kurds, Jews, Palestinians, everyone is here. Have you ever seen a streetfight between a Jew and a Palestinian? Between a Kurd? Why? Because the lifestyle here and the country it offers you, it makes you forget.” He said it is the system. “Even if I don’t like a former Baathist or Arab, I wouldn’t care in America. The system here doesn’t let you become a monster and just do whatever you want to do.” The key is the economy. If Iraq would just divide things evenly among all the different groups, and treat everyone fairly, people could get along. People would have jobs and money to support their families and they could move on with their lives. It is when there is inequality and discrimination that sentiments of unfairness and hatred build.\textsuperscript{43}

Both Ahmed and Yasir said the religious leaders play a role in propagating hate between the groups. Yasir stated, “The Sheiks of the mosques, are a big part of what’s going on for separation over the fight between the religions between Sunni and Shi’i. If you go to a mosque, you hear the religious leader talking bad about what they think of us, and if you go to our side, you hear the religious leader talk bad about the other side. It’s not every mosque but most of them, so that’s how they make the people hate.”\textsuperscript{44} Ahmed said, “The religion man destroys everything, they are greedy. They just want to control

\textsuperscript{42} Noor, interviewed by author, Woodbridge, VA, December 5, 2015.

\textsuperscript{43} Yousuf, interviewed by author, Washington, D.C., January 8, 2016.

\textsuperscript{44} Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.
the minds of the people. Before an election, the religion man and all the party go to the people, Sunni go to Sunni, Shi’i to Shi’i and say you must choose me, or the Shi’i/Sunni will control the regime. You must vote for me so the Shi’i don’t control everything. That’s why now the religion man controls all the Sunnis and the Shi’is.”

Speaking of this increased influence by the religious leaders after 2003, Harith Hasan al-Qarawee points out that the rapid collapse of the Iraqi state and its military and security forces led to unprecedented lawlessness, chaos, and reprisals. These circumstances were ideal for the empowerment of religious and fundamental identities. “Religious institutions and clerics played a significant role in filing the vacuum, particularly in the Shi’a areas. A sense of empowerment prevailed there and was revealed in the massive and celebratory participation of Shi’a pilgrims in their religious rituals.”

With all the conflict in Iraq that came before and with the 2003 invasion and that continues through today, the majority of Iraq’s educated population has left the country seeking a better life. Ahmed, Noor, Shahnaz, Yousuf, and Sami mentioned the people that remain in Iraq are left with poor educational opportunities and are easily influenced by the brainwashing and manipulations of the religious and political leaders that are furthering the divide between the groups.

Ahmed talked about Muqtada al-Sadr who is a popular Shi’i cleric that has control over the Iraqi people and influence on the government. He said, “I don’t know


46 Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, “Sectarian Relations and Socio-Political Conflict in Iraq,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, Analysis No. 200 (September 2013). 
why the Americans didn’t kill him. The people don’t think the right way, that’s why Muqtada can control their mind. He has the government behind him, and six ministers. No one can talk to him, or try to account with him. If they try, he will kill them."47

Sami, a Shi’i Muslim from Najaf, Iraq and director of the Muslim Peacemaker Teams, said, “Now we have 70% illiteracy. It’s horrible, and therefore from 2003 until now the sectarianism, the Shi’i and Sunni hatred and animosity became part of the culture, which we didn’t have before. The Sunni side were marginalized by the sectarian government of Nouri al-Maliki who ruled two terms, eight years, who applied the sectarian strategies against the Sunnis. It has nothing to do with religion, but it is about the love of power.”48

Just as the Shi’is had been left out of the government during Saddam’s regime, the new government did little to include and encourage Sunni involvement and participation. So the cycle of mistrust, exclusion, and revenge continued. According to an August 2014 Reuters article, “Maliki’s first action post-U.S. occupation – the very day after the last American combat troops withdrew – was to try and arrest his Sunni vice president, who instead escaped to Turkey. In the spring of this year, Maliki unleashed his army in Anbar to openly kill Sunnis. Labeling the indigenous Sunni movement ‘terrorist,’ the United States offered cart blanche for the slaughter. It was hoped this would be a quick fix to the problem of Sunni nationalism.”49

Based on interviews of Iraqis, and some newspaper articles, the sectarian divide – the Sunnis exclusion from government and jobs – is the reason the terrorist group the

48 Sami, skype interview with author, December 11, 2015.
Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is growing in Iraq. According to an August 2014 Washington Post article, “The Islamic State does offer Sunnis in its midst a sense of belonging and purpose… The establishment of a caliphate may seem perverse to those on the outside – including Muslim clerics and scholars – but it is providing people with succor at a desperate moment and something for which they can strive. This is probably why, in addition to fear and an intense dislike for Maliki, there has been no new ‘awakening’ among Iraq’s Sunni tribes to oppose the Islamic State.”

Sami also said it is the sectarian strategies against the Sunni that are pushing the Sunnis to join ISIL to protect themselves and/or to fight the Shi‘is. Yasir stated that, “So long as the Shi‘i are in government, the Sunnis, not all of them of course, but I would say the majority will support ISIL. So okay, you guys are in the government, then we will support ISIL and ISIL will take care of everything. So now we have a civil war for real.”

Hassan described the change in government as a bird that has been in a cage for 200 years, and when the cage is opened, it will not immediately fly and when it does it might fly sideways. As it starts to fly, someone comes along and steps on its wings and breaks them. Hassan said that is what happened in Iraq. The U.S. went there, and after the Sunnis have ruled Iraq/Mesopotamia for approximately 1400 years, and now the ruler of Iraq is Shi‘i who have always been under a guard. The door is open to the Shi‘i, but they know it is not going to be accepted. He says, “The capital for the Muslim world is

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51 Sami, skype interview with author, December 11, 2015.

52 Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.
Baghdad, and now they see Baghdad ruled by the Shi’i; that’s not going to happen, so they hire every terrorist in the world to come to Iraq. It started with al-Qaida and now it ends up with ISIL. They opened the door to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and they train and send terrorists to Iraq.”

Kanan, a political refugee and author of several books on Iraq put it this way: “Life was complicated as a minority Sunni. They were deeply fearful of the new situation and resentful as well and eventually both sides started to attack one another as Shiites and Sunnis and that got worse and worse and reached a kind of climax in the 2005-2006 civil war and it continues today on the part of the Islamic State on the Sunni part and the extreme militias that are developing on the Shiites side.” He further stated, “This is now being fueled by outside countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia and so on. It is no longer just an Iraqi conflict.”

The sectarian tensions are not always demonstrated through violence, but also are manifest in the differing views on how things should be done, what policies are or are not acceptable, and who should or should not be allowed to rule. It can interfere with their ability to govern, to create and implement policy. It also leads to the group in power getting a greater share of the state’s revenues while those not in power can be left with less resources and assistance.

When asked what he sees as the greatest problem in Iraq, Korwan said, “Religion is the greatest problem in Iraq. People can attach the Quran to any action and people will believe that action is justified. Anfal is from the Quran, and the Anfal Campaign killed

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53 Hassan, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015.
54 Kanan, phone interview with author, December 2, 2015.
as many as 182,000 people. Daesh (another name for ISIL) religious leaders preach in the mosques and convince people to join them and commit horrible acts because they quote the Quran. Even people with PhDs are being convinced by Daesh.” He talks about the religious clerics not caring about the people but just wanting more people to listen to them so they can get more money, more houses, and more wives. He says, “When you are controlled by any religion, you have a sense that yours is right and the other is wrong. When you feel like this is for God, this is what God means, and others don’t believe the same things you believe, you have some hatred inside that you can’t always control. From the Shi’i side and the Sunni side, the ignorant people are controlling them. That’s why the differences are getting deeper.”

In a 2014 interview with National Geographic, Gareth Stansfield, a professor of Middle East politics and former senior political adviser for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, talked about the current situation as a “catastrophic civil war among Sunnis and Shiites”. He mentioned ISIL and their execution of 1,700 men for being Shi’is, and said, “You can surely bet that the Shiite militias will be just as harsh when they come back. They’re not averse to being full-on sectarian as well. It’s very difficult to rewind these sorts of atrocities.” He further stated, “The ancient battle of Karbala and the killing of Ali’s sons becomes very real and very powerful in the modern setting, especially when both sides want to push it… It is about these ancient hatreds turning into

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modern realities. The fact that it’s actually taking place in the birthplace of the schism absolutely gives it added impetus and meaning.\textsuperscript{56}

The untamed sectarian conflict deepens the distrust, hate, and division between the two groups. It only perpetuates the conflict and further complicates their relationships and their ability to work together for a common goal. It prevents their ability to form a national identity and a unified, functioning government.

Chapter 3
Ethnic Conflict

Like the sectarian conflict, the ethnic conflict has some of its roots going back to its pre-Iraq history with the wars between the Arabs and the Persians. Even though the majority of Iraqis are Arabs sharing a common language, culture, and history, their religious affiliation also divides them along ethnic lines. Fanar Haddad points out, “‘Shi’a’ and ‘Sunni’ are not monolithic groups; rather they are themselves dissected by various social, economic and political categories that in themselves may unite ‘Sunnis’ and ‘Shi’as’ on the basis of, for example, class or political ideology”.57 Their shared experiences as Shi’is or Sunnis within these various social, economic, and political categories overpowers the commonalities they share as Arabs, speaking Arabic, who share Mesopotamian and Iraqi history and creates an ethnic conflict.

The Ottoman Empire spanned across the Middle East, parts of Eastern Europe and North Africa. When it was broken up by Western powers after its collapse, and Iraq was formed from three Mesopotamian provinces, Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, there were some who believed Iraq should be rejoined with their Arab neighbors as part of a larger United Arab Republic (UAR). The UAR would be a Sunni majority, which made the Shi’is uneasy as they would be a minority. Therefore, this push for Arabization, particularly by the Baath party after the 1950s, excluded the Kurds and also the Shi’is from being part of this identity. Some Kurds were willing to give up their Kurdish

57 Haddad, Sectarianism, 8.
identity to be part of the larger Arab community, or to at least gain the benefits of it.\(^{58}\) Many Shi’is joined the Baath and the push for Arabization in order to get jobs. However, both the Kurds and the Shi’is faced persecutions because of their perceived “Arabness” or lack of it. The Kurdish area is also a major oil resource and therefore a target for Saddam’s regime. The Kurds faced extreme treatment as Saddam issued a campaign of Arabization of the Kurdish region in 1988 to gain control both of the oil and prevent the Kurds from gaining strength against him.

The Arabs came to Mesopotamia from what is now Saudi Arabia during the Islamic Conquest in 651 CE. Prior to that time, the people were Assyrians, Kurds, Chaldeans, Jews, as well as other ethnicities. The ethnic conflict overlaps with the sectarian divide in that the Shi’i are seen as having ties and relations with the Persians even though the majority of Iraq’s Shi’is are Arab. Vali Nasr writes, “After Karbala, the Shia continued to challenge the caliphate, but they could never dislodge the Sunni dominance over the politics of the Islamic world. To the Sunni majority, they increasingly looked like an errant interpretation of Islam, mistakenly bestowing larger-than-life importance on the progeny of Ali and alien to the tribal sensibilities of Arabs and more reflective of Iranian and, some would argue, Yemeni attachments to heroes, saints, and charismatic individuals.”\(^{59}\)

Nasr goes on to mention that Shiism was wedded to Iran symbolically when Imam Husayn married the daughter of the last Persian Sassanid King, who was the mother of the fourth Shi’i imam. Iranians claim their devotion to Shiism goes back to the

\(^{58}\) Ajami, *Dream Palace*, 6.

\(^{59}\) Nasr, *Shia Revival*, 52.
beginning when Caliph Umar was killed by an Iranian prisoner of War. Caliph Umar forbade the marriage of Arabs and Persians and discriminated against Iranian converts.  

During the Persian Safavid Dynasty, the Iranians fought against the Sunni dominated Ottoman Empire for control over Mesopotamia. For a time, the Iranians held control over Baghdad and Mosul provinces and declared Shiism the state religion but they lost the provinces to the Ottomans in 1514. Phebe Marr mentions it was these Ottoman-Persian wars, which continued until 1818, that created suspicion and fears that the Shi’i of Iraq were prone to side with the Persians. She says, “During these long wars, the seeds of sunni dominance in government were sown. As the sunnis tightened their grip on the reigns of power, the shi’a became alienated and naturally developed a counterfocus of their own. They strengthened their ties to Persia, especially in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.” (Italics in the original)

These suspicions between Sunnis and Shi’is have continued and fears remained that if Shi’is were to come to power, Iran would be involved in Iraq’s government, which proved to be justified after the Shi’i took power in 2005. When asked about the animosity between the groups Yasir talked about how the Sunnis believe the Shi’is are related and loyal to Iran and the Sunnis do not want to see the Shi’is in power because, “They have revenge from a thousand years ago against the Persians when they invaded Iraq and Arab countries. And the same thing for the Persians, they think they were a great empire, and this guy Muhammad just walked in and destroyed the whole country,

60 Nasr, Shia Revival, 63.


so they want revenge as well.” He talked about the government, and that as long as the Shi’i are in power Iran is involved in everything. Yasir is a Shi’i and he said, “I don’t like it because I know what is going to happen. It means Islamic revolution and hell no, not in my country. There are no human rights, you can’t go to court, it’s messed up. Sunnis want to fight that. They don’t want an Islamic revolution, not because of the Islamic thing, but because they don’t want to be like Iran. Iran is our enemy.”

Throughout Saddam’s time in power, he propagated these suspicions and rumors about Shi’i loyalty to Iran. He was always searching for any signs of resistance among any of the different groups in Iraq. He paid close attention to the Shi’is and the Kurds who did not fit within his plans for an Arab nation and who had already demonstrated their dislike for the regime. In his book, A History of Iraq, Charles Tripp says, “The severity of the government’s attack on the Shi’a and their organizations lead some militant parties to encourage their followers to make their way to Iran. Taking this further, in 1981 the Iraqi government began to provide financial incentives for Iraqi men to divorce their Iranian wives, intending to create rifts among the Shia and forming part of the government’s campaign to underline the Arab nature of Iraq’s Shia population.” Tripp argues this was done in an effort to drive a wedge between the Iraqi Shi’is and the Iranian Shi’is who they were fighting, and placed stricter controls on the Iraqi Shi’is, their shrines and mosques.

Saddam was quick to respond to any signs of resistance or rebellion, usually in a brutal manner. Prior to the start of the Iran/Iraq War in 1977, there had been skirmishes

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63 Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.

64 Tripp, A History of Iraq, 225.
between the government and the Shi’is that resulted in the arrest of more than two thousand Shi’is and another approximately two hundred thousand deported to Iran on the grounds that they were not Iraqis. Despite the fact that thousands of Shi’is fought and died for Iraq during the eight-year war with Iran, suspicions of their ties to Iran remained. This only aided in the Shi’is feeling further alienated from the Sunni dominated government and discriminated against. Thus creating more division between the different groups.

Hassan remembered when he was just fourteen years old and he was being trained on how to drive tanks and being sent to the war with Iran. He got two bullets in the chest but survived and joined in the Shi’i uprisings in 1991. He talked about how there was no hope in his country. All they saw was war. He said, “You either go to Iran War, or in the city you get killed by Saddam’s forces. If you go to the war, you get killed by the Iranians. If you come home, you get taken into custody by Saddam’s Secret Service, so where do you go?” He said that is why the Shi’is rebelled. They could not live under a dictator anymore.

The Kurds, like the Shi’i, were considered a problem for Iraq. They did not get along very well with the Sunni dominated Iraqi government. They desired to have autonomy from Iraq and wanted freedom to use their own language and practice their own culture. Kirmanj writes, “Some groups residing within the postcolonial or colonial nation-state also call themselves “nations,” but are better known as nations-without-states. Nations-without-states are territorial communities that have their own identities.

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65 Coughlin, Saddam, 148.

66 Hassan, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015
and a desire for self-determination but they are included within the boundaries of one or more states with which they do not identify.”67 This is true in the case of the Kurds and it continues to be an issue for Iraq. The Kurds existed in Iraq since it’s ancient days as Mesopotamia. They have their own identity, language, and history. They have largely been autonomous because of the rugged mountainous terrain, their economic self-sufficiency, and their ability to defend their territory.68 They are spread across modern-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Kirkuk is the disputed capital of Iraq’s Kurdistan and the center of Iraq’s oil industry, which makes it highly desirable by the Iraqi government and the Kurds.69

Following World War I, the Kurds were promised their own nation by the Allied Powers and the Ottoman government in the Treaty of Sevres. However, that promise has not been fulfilled and the Kurdish people have felt like second-class citizens in Iraq. Yousuf told of going to college and being denied school supplies because he is Kurdish and was therefore denied a security pass to be at the university. It was only after he bribed one of the Arab officials that he was able to obtain the security pass to be in school, and given supplies.

Yousuf also talked about the struggle Kurds went through to own property. He had wealthy uncles who were unable to legally own property because they were Kurds, not Arabs. His uncles had good Arab friends who trusted his uncles, so the friends would transfer the property under their name. Yousuf said, “They had two options: either you

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68 Dawisha, *Iraq*, 70.
change your identity in court and say I’m Kurdish no more, or if you stay Kurdish, you can’t own anything.”

The Al-Anfal Campaign was Saddam’s effort to solve “the Kurdish problem” and began in early 1988. Saddam’s cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid nicknamed “Chemical Ali” was tasked with this job. Poison gas was dropped on villages. Fires were set on people’s homes. People were gathered and taken to different prisons. Mass executions were held, and by the end, anywhere from 100,000 to 182,000 people were killed. There were eight Anfal Campaigns in all and it ended in September 1988. When people were finally released they were not allowed to return to their villages as the majority of them had been completely destroyed and land mines set up to discourage resettlement. In Halabja, which was separate from the Anfal Campaigns, chemical weapons were dropped and approximately 5,000 people were killed. When asked how this affected him, Yousuf said, “I hated Saddam since I was four years old, when I realized who I am. A lot of people had been killed. Those families killed by chemical weapons; entire families were buried alive, and this all affects you. You grow up with hate against certain groups, against the Baath party.”

Korwan talked about the aftermath of the Anfal Campaign in 1988, in which thousands of Kurds were relocated and killed. Saddam also had Arabs brought into the Kurdish territory as part of his Arabization effort and in an attempt to lessen Kurdish control over their territory. Korwan said Saddam wanted to wipe the Kurds off the map,
especially in the areas close to the border with Iran and that is why Saddam used chemical weapons. He said it was because of the Kurdish revolution and the help they received from the Iranian government. Korwan and his family, other than his father who was killed in a rebellion against Saddam’s regime, were miraculously spared when the Anfal Campaign suddenly came to an end. His family had been moved to a house being used as a prison with approximately sixty other people. They were relocated to another prison and told they could not go outside, and they could not go to school. He registered for school under a different name so he could go. His family was relocated another time, and any time they wanted to leave, they had to get permission. They had limited opportunities to study and were not allowed to study aeronautical science or chemical engineering. Korwan studied math in Ramadi in a Sunni controlled city. He then studied civil engineering but two years after the fall of Saddam, he had to change locations to study in Sulamaniyah because the Kurds were being accused of treason.73

Kurds continue to work on gaining autonomy from Iraq and are in favor of making Iraq into three federalisms. Korwan saw what his people, the Kurds, have faced from the Arabs and understands why Kurds would not want to risk being hurt again. However, he also recognizes that it would be in the Kurds best interest if they would unite first with the Arabs rather than being divided now and always. He said if you cannot forgive, then you cannot live. Right now the country is messed up, on the brink of bankruptcy, and if each group only thinks of their best interests, then they are all going to lose. For the benefit of the Kurdish people, Korwan believes it would be best if they could form a united Iraq first so they can fix the primary issues and then maybe they can

73 Korwan, interviewed by author, Manassas Park, VA, February 5, 2016.
divide into three federalisms and have a relationship where they can all work together. He said right now it is hard for the Kurds to face ISIL alone. Baghdad is not sending the Kurds their portion of the budget or supplies that would help them. If they break apart now, what good does it do for them? When Korwan discussed this with his Kurdish friends they said, “The Arabs are still thinking 4,000 years ago when such and such happened and they are still living in that mentality. We cannot attach our future with people who still believe in and fight based on things that happened 4,000 years ago.”

Korwan also talked about the Hashd al-Shabi, the Shi’i militia. Since the government of Iraq was unable to fight ISIL, the Shi’i clerics regrouped and formed a militia to fight. They declared this is a jihad against the Sunni, and because of this, Korwan is afraid the Hashd al-Shabi will come after the Peshmerga, the Kurdish military, after ISIL is gone. He said, “The Hashd al-Shabi took control of Tikrit with the support of the government, so I’m worried because they’re a militia and militias take on their own special interests. The Peshmerga works for the Kurds and the Hashd al-Shabi works for the Central Government, so I feel there will be a conflict later on. The Peshmerga control one side of Kirkuk province and the Hashd al-Shabi control the other side.”

Adeed Dawisha writes that the ingrained ethnosectarian identities and loyalties existed in the Saddam era and that the post 2003 institutions did little to weaken them. He writes, “State institutions themselves seemed to endorse and legitimize particularistic loyalties through purposeful policies and decisions. Once ethnosectarian identity became the defining element in peoples’ choices and preferences, and the central knot that tied

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74 Korwan, interviewed by author, Manassas Park, VA, February 5, 2016.
people into a communal solidarity, violence against the threatening ‘other,’ represented in other identities, would be undertaken more readily and with less inhibition.”

Korwan said there used to be hope for an Iraqi identity but now when he talks to his Kurdish and Arab colleagues, he is discouraged and does not see a good future for Iraq. Everyone is working for their own benefit and following their own interests. He returned to the analogy of the house and said if you are all working together, supporting each other, then no one can hurt you. When you face the world by yourself, you are not as strong. If they could unite, there would be a budget from Baghdad, and there could be relationships with the other Arab countries so there would not be as many problems. He said, “We have a chance for our people to come outside to study, to diversify, to make investments. You can be strong, but if it’s just you by yourself, you just have hatred.”

Like the sectarian conflict, the ethnic conflict continues to perpetuate conflict and inequality that leaves Iraq divided. There is a lot of distrust between Arabs and Kurds, and between Sunnis and Shi’is, with their real or perceived relations with Iran that make it difficult for Iraqis to work together. Instead they continue to pull against each other, which does not depict a prosperous future for Iraq.

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75 Dawisha, *Iraq*, 262.

76 Korwan, interviewed by author, Manassas Park, VA, February 5, 2016.
Chapter 4

Foreign Influence/Intervention

Mesopotamia was once a great society. It is those years of greatness followed by the years of devastation and an inability to regain that prosperity that creates sentiments of humiliation. Journalist Thomas L. Friedman notes that Muslims are taught from their youth that Islam is the most advanced form of the three monotheistic faiths, but it is the Christian and Jewish countries that are thriving in education, science, and development. He said this creates a poverty of dignity.\(^77\) Not only is the West surpassing Iraqis, but they are intervening in Iraqi affairs, which fuels an identity of humiliation, and sentiments of distrust, and dislike of foreigners, Westerners in particular.

Even when foreigners are not directly involved in Iraqi politics and society, their perceived influence is still felt and plays a part in Iraqi politics. Noor mentioned that Iraqis are a suspicious and superstitious people, probably because of all the contention between the groups and outsiders. There have not been very many good interactions with foreigners so there is no trust.\(^78\) Part of the superstitions could be a result of the rumors spread about Iranian, Israeli, American, European, and Saudi Arabia’s influence in Iraqi affairs. It is hard to know which influences are real and which are based on rumors.

The system of government established by the Ottomans, their reliance on and favoritism of Sunnis, set the stage for British dependence on Sunnis who had been better educated and prepared for governance under the Ottomans. Kurdish desires for


\(^78\) Noor, interviewed by author, Ft Belvoir, VA, February 17, 2015.
autonomy and keeping the British out of their area as well as Shi`i rebellions made the British suspicious of including them in government. Tripp says Shi`is lack of administrative experience and British wariness towards the Shi`is after the 1920 revolt, left the British more prone to rely on Sunni ex-Ottoman officials.\(^79\) From the beginning of Iraq’s history, foreign intervention was building sentiments of resentment and distrust toward foreigners, and between the different groups.

Yousuf mentioned the Kurds and Shi`is fighting the British in the 1920s and that the Sunnis did not. This was the reason the British gave power to the Sunnis, which was one of their biggest mistakes, but before them it was the Ottomans. The Sunnis took power and persecuted the Shi`is and Kurds. He said the Ottomans were worse than the British because the Ottomans brought in fighters from Azerbaijan and took them to the Kurdish areas and some Arab areas and would distribute acres of land to them. “Even before the British and Ottomans, there were the Mongolians, Genghis Khan and these guys. They destroyed the whole area.”\(^80\)

Hassan talked about Iraq’s beginnings, that it was imparted from the Ottoman Empire and the British when they invaded Iraq in 1914, and after the Second World War. He described Iraq being decided, “By some guy sitting on a ship with his packs of cigarettes and he drew the map of Iraq. That is no identity.”\(^81\)

A country study on Iraq notes, “Ultimately, the British-created monarchy suffered from a chronic legitimacy crisis: the concept of a monarchy was alien to Iraq. Despite his

\(^{79}\) Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 45.

\(^{80}\) Yousuf, interviewed by author, Washington, D.C., January 8, 2016.

\(^{81}\) Hassan, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015.
Islamic and pan-Arab credentials, Faisal was not an Iraqi, and, no matter how effectively he ruled, Iraqis saw the monarchy as a British creation. The continuing inability of the government to gain the confidence of the people fueled political instability well into the 1970s.”

Faisal had to balance the demands of the British with the competing demands and needs of the people. This balancing act was one of the factors that limited his ability to govern the country without upsetting either the British or one or more elements of Iraqi society. Dawisha writes, “In the first decade of Iraqi statehood the King and his government were put time and time again in the untenable situation of trying to gain popular legitimacy by pursuing independent policies, only to see the credibility of the government undermined through strong armed British interference.” Uprisings and rebellions continued throughout his reign as well as the reigns of the monarchs that followed him. Mistakes made by the British increased Iraqi’s distrust of Western imperialist powers and Iraqis continued to pursue independence.

Iraq gained independence in 1932, but remained subject to British influence until the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Republic of Iraq in 1958. Despite the turmoil following Iraq’s creation and independence, questions regarding Iraq’s identity, what it should be, and what it meant to be Iraqi were still discussed. There was an effort by some politicians to put forth an Iraq first policy, and to focus on building Iraq.

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83 Dawisha, Iraq, 13.
When asked if Iraq ever had an identity Kanan said, he believed it did during his father’s generation. He also said his father’s generation completely identified with Iraq and its diversity. The 1940s-1960s were the heyday of Iraq. It was flourishing during that time and was some of its most culturally productive years. However, it was the Baath regime that began putting forth the idea of the Arab nation of which Iraq was an artificial part. He also said, “They were uncomfortable within the borders of what is Iraq today. With the 2003 invasion, and the overthrow of the Baath regime, the question for Iraqis from day one was pretty much “who am I?” That question is not yet answered.” He further stated, “You can’t speak for every Iraqi as your answer because the country has begun to be buffeted about by changes so former victims are today in power and they have become victimizers. Some victimizers have turned victims and some victims have acquired relative independence and autonomy, like the Kurds, so it’s a very complicated situation and entities are being formed even as we speak.”

Baath ideology became popular in Syria and quickly spread to Iraq, Egypt, and Libya. Its goal was a single Arab socialist nation. In Iraq this ideology divided the country between those who wanted an Iraq first policy and those who wanted pan-Arabism. Journalist Sandra Mackey writes that within the officers’ corps, Iraq was divided between two pillars of national identity. “One stood on the ground of a specific Iraqi nationalism encompassing all the characteristics and interests particular to Iraq. The other soared into the clouds of pan-Arabism where dwelled the dream of the great borderless Arab state. It was around theses competing visions – Iraq as a unique and separate state and Iraq as an element in the Arab nation – that factions within the army

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84 Kanan, phone interview by author, December 2, 2015.
would battle in recurring cycles from 1936 to 1968 for the right to define the Iraqi state."\textsuperscript{85}

In 1966, skirmishes between Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan against Israel eventually led to Egypt mobilizing its forces against Israel in June 1967. The Six Day War between the Arab nations, to include Iraq, and Israel ended with approximately 17,000 casualties from the Arab nations and only 700 Israeli casualties. In a preemptive air assault, Israel destroyed more than 90\% of Egypt’s air force sitting on the tarmac on the first day.\textsuperscript{86} This war was a humiliating defeat for the Arabs and haunted Iraq for many years after. Coughlin writes, “Israel’s victory traumatized the Arab world, not least because it dealt a devastating blow to President Nasser’s belligerent claim that a unified Arab assault would be sufficient to destroy the “Zionist entity,” the euphemism by which he referred to Israel.”\textsuperscript{87} There was resentment in Iraq toward the Abd al-Rahman Arif government for not contributing sufficiently to the Six Day War and Iraqis responded to Baath Party Arab nationalist rhetoric. A year later on July 17, 1968, the Baath overthrew the Arif government and came to power.\textsuperscript{88}

With the establishment of Israel in 1948, Zionist conspiracy theories and persecution of Iraq’s Jewish population grew. The government was announcing plots of Zionist spy rings in Iraq, and calling for the death of the spies. Kanan Makiya in his book, \textit{Republic of Fear}, quotes a speech by the Baath President Hassan al-Bakr, “We


\textsuperscript{87} Coughlin, \textit{Saddam}, 67.

\textsuperscript{88} Mackey, \textit{Reckoning}, 198.
face treacherous movements of a rabble of fifth columnists and the new supporters of America and Israel… These suspected and suspicious movements are undertaking the duties assigned to them and executing their role in the American conspiracy.” He said, “This was done with the intention of keeping us preoccupied from the great battle with the Zionist enemy.”

There are Iraqis who continue to subscribe to these conspiracy theories and blame Israel and America for their problems. Sami talked about the creation of Israel and that it created problems for Muslims. He mentioned how we hear all about the Islamic State (ISIL) but we never hear about the Jewish State in mainstream media. He said, “The Jewish State is a fact. It’s been around since 1948, but you never hear about it and the Jewish State is so racist, and commits a lot of crimes against humanity, against Palestinians, other Arab countries when there is a war like with Lebanon, Gaza, Egypt, Iraq. So anyway, you have Israel, the protection of Israel, oil and land.”

He went on to discuss the Yinon Plan, and Israel’s goal, in cooperation with the U.S., of expanding Israel over Syria and Iraq. He talked about the Israeli flag with the Star of David representing Israel and the two blue lines being the Euphrates and the Nile, indicating all of this is Israel’s promised land. He claimed ISIL is helping the Israelis to accomplish this goal by weakening Iraq and Syria. He said, “Israel, with the help of the Kurdistan authority, is buying lots of land around the Tigris and Euphrates and in major cities that connect them with Turkey and Syria.”

Sami left Iraq in 1976 but returned after the 2003 invasion and continues to live there. He believed the events of 9/11 happened because of the need for oil, and that Dick

89 The speech was published as a pamphlet entitled: Kul shay' min 'ajl al-ma'raka (Baghdad: Ministry of Education and Information, 1970), 6-7 quoted in Kanan Makiya, Republic of Fear (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 49.
Cheney orchestrated it so the U.S. would have a reason to invade Afghanistan. This would allow the U.S. to control the oil and build a pipeline across Central Asia, which was being rejected by the Taliban.\(^\text{90}\)

Suspicious of Westerners and foreigners continue to flourish in Iraq. Hassan mentioned that the 1991 uprisings were not suitable to the Saudis because of Iran next door. He said this is why the Saudis did not help them during the rebellion. He stated that the Saudis are Wahhabi and that they let the extremists into Iraq.\(^\text{91}\) Ahmed expressed similar sentiments. He said that after the Iraqi army was defeated in Kuwait and the army began fighting Saddam, that the king of Saudi Arabia went to President Bush and convinced him to keep Saddam in power. He said the king of Saudi Arabia wanted Iraq to remain Sunni, so Saddam regrouped and killed all the people rebelling. He also said “All other countries want to take part in Iraq. Arab neighbors have done everything to destroy Iraq by forcing terrorists into the country to destroy science, doctors, everything.”\(^\text{92}\)

When the U.S. invaded Iraq in March 2003, some saw it as liberation and others saw it as an occupation. Yousuf said the Kurds saw it as liberation, they were freed from Saddam, but they also blamed the U.S. for not having a plan to help establish a new country.\(^\text{93}\) Ahmed said they were all happy when Bush decided to get rid of Saddam. They wanted another life and another leader to stop all the war. But when the Americans came they made a lot of mistakes such as letting the army go. He also said the council

\(^{90}\) Sami, skype interview with author, December 11, 2015.

\(^{91}\) Hassan, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015.

\(^{92}\) Ahmed, interviewed by author, Alexandria, VA, November 9, 2015.

\(^{93}\) Yousuf, interviewed by author, Washington, D.C., January 8, 2016.
that was formed by the Americans was a mistake. He said, “They put a counselor from Sunni, Shi’i, and Kurd, which put many people in control of Iraq. Before we don’t know Sunni, Shi’i, Kurd, Saddam controlled Iraq by power on the people. This is the beginning of the problem for Iraq.”

Ali was a lawyer in Iraq in the late 1980s, early 90s, and went back to Iraq after 2003 to work with Coalition Forces in setting up the justice system. He said, “The U.S. came and the next day Iraq is a democracy. Democracy is not a switch you can turn off and on. Democracy is a belief. We, the Arabs, by culture are dictators. It comes from the government; from the way they treat you. It takes time.”

Sami said there are two things the U.S. did that had a tremendously negative effect on Iraq. One was the abandonment of the Iraqi army and the other was the de-Baathification, the firing of all Baath party members from holding positions of authority, of Iraq. Sami said, “It made Iraq without any security forces and allowed all the agencies, whether they are local, Middle East, or international to interfere in Iraq and cause the problems that we are witnessing today. We don’t have an army now to protect Iraq.”

Shahnaz also said the disbanding of the military was a huge mistake. She believed Paul Bremer wanted to destroy the country. She told about her neighbor who had been a street cleaner and the next day he showed up in a military uniform and said


they paid him money and gave him the uniform. He did not actually work for the military; he just took the money and the uniform.\textsuperscript{96}

Saddam worked hard to bring Iraqis to the Baath ideology and make them part of the Baath party which was the Arab Socialist Party. Overtime though, the party’s focus went from Arab nationalism to Saddam himself. Dawisha explains how after 1979, a more accurate name for the Baathi state would be the Saddamist state. He made sure he was perceived as the sole arbiter of power, and that any elevation in status was due to him personally and not to notions of “Party seniority” or “Ba’thist fidelity”.\textsuperscript{97} The Baath party controlled everything: the media, the military, the schools, which basically made membership in the Baath party essential.

Charles Tripp writes that disbanding the military and dissolving the Baath party put some 300,000 armed young men out of work, stopped the pensions of tens of thousands ex-officers, and purged the government ministries of some 30,000 people, including their most experienced administrators.\textsuperscript{98}

With the growth of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, some Iraqis are looking to the Western powers to do something to stop their growth and killing. Ahmed said, “We lose trust for the Americans and the British, especially with ISIL. They don’t seem to be fighting them. America has the biggest army in the world and the most power in the world, but ISIL is growing. I don’t know what they want.”\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{96} Shahnaz, interviewed by author, Ft Belvoir, VA, May 23, 2015.

\textsuperscript{97} Dawisha, \textit{Iraq}, 216.

\textsuperscript{98} Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq}, 282.

\textsuperscript{99} Ahmed, interviewed by author, Alexandria, VA, November 9, 2015.
Everyone is involved in Iraq now, but no one trusts each other. Shahnaz said, “Because we don’t trust anyone now Iraq probably won’t survive as a country. We don’t have trust with the Kurdish people, the Syrians, the Iranians, Kuwaitis, so it makes it difficult. They don’t know what they’re going to do, who will control the oil, or what the future for Iraq is.”

Kirmanj writes that, “Many scholars suggest that the civil unrest, sectarian violence, and ongoing chaos in Iraq are the result of the US invasion and its failure to impose law and order… Others blame the creator of the Iraqi state – that is, Britain – for failing in the process of state-building from the very beginning… The shortcoming of this argument is that it tends to enlarge the role of the state in constructing identity while marginalizing the will and attachment of the people to identity and homeland.”

When asked about the foreign influence and intervention in Iraq, Kanan says that while Iraq is the scene of a lot of foreign intervention, it was Saddam who invaded Iran, and Kuwait, and abused the Iraqi people. “The world has been grown into Iraqi problems, not just forcing itself. It’s a combination, but I think the abuses of one community by another is what caused this complex. By far and away the biggest cause of it, identity issues and these complexes over identity is Iraqi driven, not driven by outside forces.”

Yousuf pointed to the disunity within Iraq for its problems. If they had been more united after the U.S. and Coalition Forces left, they would have been fine handling the

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100 Shahnaz, interviewed by author, Ft Belvoir, VA, May 23, 2015.
101 Kirmanj, Identity and Nation in Iraq, 9.
102 Kanan, phone interview by author, December 2, 2015.
power given to them. He said, “We always blame the U.S. and Coalition Forces but guess what, 90% of the stuff that is happening to the Iraqis is because there is no unity. I don’t think the foreign invasion had any negative effects on the politics.”

Noor said she believes it is easy to blame the Americans. “They are like the scapegoat because everyone looked bad when they came, but everyone was bad before they came. It’s just we didn’t have the media to show us. I don’t think it’s only the Americans.”

While it may not have been the U.S. and England’s responsibility to establish a national identity in Iraq, foreign intervention and influence played on the decades old feelings of resentment and favoritism that existed between the groups. Western powers did not fully understand the culture and the dynamic between the groups and therefore did not set up systems of governance that would work for Iraqis. Yasir stated that every time there is a war, or invasion, or a dispute it affects the whole country, and the culture – the Shi’i and Sunni culture.


104 Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.
Chapter 5
Internal Political Conflict

Conflict from Iraq’s political system began with the formation of Iraq by a foreign power who installed a foreign king. Those chosen to govern set up policies that promoted inequality and discrimination between the different groups of people. Following the ouster of the monarchy and the British, the conflicts became increasingly violent and full of conspiracies as one government overthrew another. Iraq’s leaders included the people in their acts of violence, making a spectacle out of it, and thereby setting an example of violence for the people to follow.

The Baath party, which Saddam Hussein had a major role in, came to power in 1968, and Saddam took power in 1979. Saddam used violence and fear to rule over the people, and has done the most to destroy whatever identity Iraq may have had or hoped to have. He created war and turmoil that left the country destitute. When he was removed from power in 2003, the Iraqi people did not know how to act. They had never been free before, and had been traumatized by life under Baathi rule for thirty-five years.

The U.S. invasion in 2003 brought a new system of government but they followed the same policies of inequality and discrimination that has existed since Iraq’s formation. The corruption that exists in the government and the tensions between the different groups of people, the lack of trust in its leaders, leave little hope that Iraq will survive as one country. The country is divided among the different groups, is bankrupt, and is trying to fight the growing presence of ISIL.
The years following Iraq’s independence in 1932 were a time of great instability, uncertainty and violence. Iraq went through a series of coups following the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, and the declaration of the Iraqi Republic. Uprisings and rebellions appeared among the Kurds and the Shi’is as uncertainty over the Arab nationalist agenda grew and also for the Kurds as promises by the Iraqi government for autonomy continued to go unfulfilled. The armed forces became a national institution and officers within the army became key political players. As the uprisings and rebellions appeared and the army succeeded in putting them down, their political status grew.

Charles Tripp argues that the Iraqi state was developing an array of political procedures and practices that came from those who were able to wield significant power over the Iraqi population and created politics that were distinctively Iraqi. He goes on to say that certain features were becoming apparent. These features included personal trust, promotion of inequality through either material goods or status, and the need for discipline, primarily through the use of coercion. “These features made any construction of an Iraqi identity ambiguous, since it was obvious that any such identity would be determined largely by individuals who had an overdeveloped sense of Iraq as an apparatus of power and an underdeveloped sense of Iraq as a community.”105 So from its beginning, indigenous Iraqi politics set the stage for division and inequality instead of fostering policies that would create a unified identity for Iraq.

The political leaders during these years following independence did not refrain from using violence or from broadcasting it. According to a BBC report about the 1958 coup that overthrew the monarchy, “It is said that the body of the Crown Prince was left

105 Tripp, A History of Iraq, 103-104
hanging outside the defense ministry for all to see.” President Karim Qasim, who replaced the monarchy, was shot multiple times, and his bullet ridden, dead body was repeatedly televised to rid any doubt of his death. In a bloodless coup, the Baath party gained power in 1968 and Hassan al-Bakr, the leader of the Baath party, became the President. Hassan al-Bakr was a cousin and mentor to Saddam so it was not surprising that Saddam was his second in command. However, soon after Saddam began amassing power for himself.

Conspiracy theories and calls for ridding Iraq of the Zionist traitors were a big part of Baathi rule. Supposed spy rings were rounded up and the people executed. On January 27, 1969, shortly after the Baath came to power, fourteen men, eleven of which were Jewish, were accused of being spies and were hung in Liberation Square in Baghdad. The entire event was promoted and everyone was encouraged to attend. Con Coughlin describes it “as the most sensational in Iraqi history… A carnival-like atmosphere had taken over the city…. entire families had spread out on the flower beds for a picnic. For those unable to attend, the event was broadcast live on Iraqi television and radio.”

Kanan Makiya writes that these show trials became all the rage over the next few years but that this spectacle stood out because of the participation of the masses. Smaller demonstrations of show trials and public hangings began to create feelings of unease. “As terror struck deeper into the population – and no longer solely at its margins –

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107 Coughlin, *Saddam*, 72.
withdrawal, cynicism, suspicion, and eventually pervasive fear replaced participation as the predominant psychological profile of the masses.”  

Despite his known ties to the Baath party, and the behavior manifested by the Baath party, people were still excited when Saddam took power 1979. They saw him as the person who would restore Iraq and Iraqi pride. Shahnaz was in her early 20s during this time. When asked about it, she said “People were excited at first. They really liked him. He would go around and talk to people and ask what they needed but after six months he changed. He began showing himself to be a dictator. People started going to prison, some were tortured, and others were killed.” She told the story of her brother-in-law who was an ambassador to England. He was appointed in 1979, but spent many years in prison because a group of them were accused of conspiring against Saddam. Her brother-in-law was lucky, as some of the others arrested with him were executed.

In a January 2000 PBS Frontline interview with Said K. Aburish, Said was asked why he worked for Saddam Hussein and he said, Saddam was the one Arab leader who was making progress in Iraq. He said, “We supported him because the Arabs were defeated and humiliated in 1967, and we wanted one Arab country to move ahead and be strong, economically and militarily. We saw Iraq as that one country…. Iraq had wealth, it had population, it had prospects. We were enamored with what Saddam was doing.” Said Aburish further mentioned that it did not take long for people to see him as the dictator he was. Once he started using chemical weapons on his own people that was the

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110 Said K. Aburish, interview by Frontline, PBS, January 25, 2000, 
tipping point. He said it showed Saddam did not care how many people he had to eliminate in order to stay in power.

Saddam loved power, and he created a whole culture revolving about his person. There were pictures everywhere of him, and broadcasts on TV of his family vacations, showing himself to be the head of the perfect Iraqi family and something everyone should strive for. He changed whatever Iraqi loyalty existed from Iraq to himself. Ali said, “Saddam created the saying that what Saddam says, Iraq says. He changed whatever loyalty existed to Iraq to himself.”

Saddam believed the glory of the Arabs was tied to the glory of Iraq. In his mind, anytime in history Iraq flourished, the Arabs flourished. He tied himself to the great conquerors of the past, Saladin and Nebuchadnezzar who had both conquered Jerusalem. He was determined to make Iraq great, no matter the financial or human cost.

Family and tribal relations were very important in Iraqi culture. Oftentimes, people would marry their cousins to ensure loyalty and trust. It is no surprise then that when Saddam came to power, he put his family members, brothers, sons, uncles, in key positions such as the army, and the security system. Said continued, “Family and tribal connections are supreme. They come ahead of ideology. They come ahead of commitment to the nation-state, they come ahead of all commitments….”

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112 Hassan, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015.
the party and strengthened the family... Those people are loyal to him, because they believe that if Saddam goes, they will go as well.”

To ensure the public were also being loyal to him, he would randomly visit people’s homes with a TV crew following him so it could be broadcast. Noor said, “You never knew when he was going to show up. You may be expecting a friend for tea and when you hear a knock at the door, you think it’s your friend, but Saddam would be standing there instead.” You always had to have his picture up and make sure there was nothing questionable about your devotion to him. He would also invite people to join him for hunting parties that included a picnic with friends and family. Con Coughlin points out that an invitation to one of these events did not mean a position with the party. Saddam would use these sorts of outings with their relaxed atmosphere to allow people to talk and should any ideological difference arise, he would know who his potential rivals were. Therefore he could take care of them early by execution or assassination.

Despite the importance of family in Iraqi culture, Saddam was able to create distrust within families and between neighbors. He used fear to rule and control the populations. Ali said, “You don’t trust even yourself, you are all running from your wife, your coworkers, your daughters, etc. It is fear, fear, fear 24/7 and not just fear from the regime but also fear that if someone doesn’t like you, they can make an accusation against you. Imagine, according to the Iraqi criminal law if you say something about God, if you insult God this is not more than three months in jail but if you insult Saddam,
it’s capital punishment.”  This demonstrates the level of devotion that Saddam was expecting from his citizens. He put himself higher than God and expected people to be more loyal to him than to God, their religion, their family, their country.

Hassan said the time of Saddam was a disaster for Iraq. “He stole the country, he stole everything from us.” Hassan tells about his neighbor whose uncle was killed, and his two nephews who were only in seventh grade. “Imagine, kids in seventh grade taken, put in jail for two months, tortured, and then executed. What can you do? The government is taking kids! What kind of life are you going to lead?”

Ahmed said, “I can’t even talk to my brother and discuss with him about Saddam or the Arab Socialist Party (Baath) because Saddam made everyone afraid. He put the fear inside all of them, and you think he will take you to prison if you say something, so no one can talk.”

One of Saddam’s first decisions as President was to go to war with Iran. No one is really sure what his reasoning was for this, but on September 22, 1980, Saddam invaded Iran. He claimed it was over the Shatt-el-Arab River, which provides Iraq’s only outlet to the sea. Others believe Saddam went to war over fears that the Shi’i community would choose to side with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who was living in exile in Najaf, Iraq, at that time, and that Iraq would fall apart from within. A new radical Islamic government was in power in Iran and the Baath party was deeply concerned over the

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117 Hassan, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015.
prospects of an Islamic revolution in Iraq since Iraq is majority Shi’i and they were perceived as being tied to Iran.\textsuperscript{119}

An estimated 250,000-500,000 Iraqis died in the Iran/Iraq war. A lot of wives were left without husbands and had to learn how to support their families. Children growing up without fathers, or in some cases, both parents as a mother may have been killed in one of the many bombings that struck Iraq. Phebe Marr writes that to make up for the loss of life, Saddam encouraged people, including women in their forties and fifties, to have large families. She writes, “Far more important for women, however, was the toll of casualties on marriage and the family… Postponement of marriage, loss of manpower, and the decade-long delay in starting careers and work for both young women and men took a heavy toll on the family, still the bedrock of Iraqi society.” People were losing a sense of confidence in their country’s future.\textsuperscript{120}

It was during the Iran/Iraq war that Saddam first used chemical weapons. Part of Saddam’s logic for having chemical weapons included the projection of power that comes with having weapons of mass destruction. Saddam wanted to be a player on the international stage and having chemical weapons put him on a more level playing ground with other world powers. It was also for protection. Saddam was not afraid to use them against his enemies, including his own people. Saddam used chemical weapons during the Iran/Iraq War to stop the Iranians from advancing. Iran, in turn, developed their own chemical weapons and used them on Iraq. There are rumors Saddam used them against the Shi’is but it could not be proven. The most well known instance is when he used

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{119} Coughlin, \textit{Saddam}, 148.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Marr, \textit{The Modern History of Iraq}, 209.
\end{itemize}
them against the Kurds during his Anfal Campaign and Halabja in 1988. The use of chemical weapons increased sentiments of hate, fear, and distrust of the government.

Before the Iran/Iraq war, Iraq had a surplus of money from its oil revenues and the economy had been booming. Schools, and hospitals were built, jobs increased, and Saddam started a program to fight illiteracy in Iraq. Shahnaz and Noor talked about this time as a wonderful time. There were scholarships for people to go study in England and Europe, money for paving roads and redoing the sewer system. Shahnaz, being a teacher, was sent to the south of Iraq to teach people, including the older generations to read and write, and also basic hygiene as part of Saddam’s policy to get rid of illiteracy. After the Iran/Iraq war, Iraq was in deep financial debts and it no longer had the money for the schools, hospitals, road maintenance, and other public services. Noor explained that if you got sick, you would go to your family and friends to try to get money to go to a private doctor because the public hospitals were in such bad shape that even the doctors would tell patients to go to a private doctor.

Kuwait was declared independent in June 1961. Then President Karim Qasim disputed this and demanded Kuwait be returned to Iraq, as he believed it was part of Basra province. Tripp writes, “These boundaries had been deliberately flouted by the British authorities, to restrict Iraq’s access to the sea and thus to reduce its influence in the Gulf. The implication of this was that it was the duty of all true Iraqi patriots to remove this last residue of imperialism and to establish Iraq’s rightful place as the

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121 Shahnaz, interviewed by author, Woodbridge, VA, December 5, 2015.

122 Noor, interviewed by author, Woodbridge, VA, December 5, 2015.
dominant power at the headwaters of the Gulf.” Saddam returned to these sentiments regarding Kuwait, and claimed that Kuwait was stealing Iraq’s oil. Therefore, Saddam invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and on January 17, 1991, the United States led a coalition that included several Arab countries to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait. American bombing in Baghdad forced residents to flee the city resulting in additional hardships for the people.

The Gulf War ended on February 28, 1991. Defeated Iraqi troops marched back to Iraq destitute and angry. Iraq had no money and inflation was high. Yasir said he often asked his mom how she survived during this time with so little. His father was killed in the Iran/Iraq War leaving his mother to raise their family. His father served Iraq for 25 years and his pension would only buy two-dozen eggs every three months. His mother was a teacher and would earn approximately a hundred dollars a month. Yasir was the youngest child and remembered being sent to pick up the pension and also being sent to the market when the government would sell chickens. He said chicken was so expensive they could only eat it maybe once a month. He said every so often the government would bring a big truck to the public market with chickens to sell for cheaper. Crowds of people would gather in the market for about six hours waiting for the truck to arrive when it was a hundred and ten degrees outside, to get one chicken. He said people during this time were crazy. They were killing or robbing others because everything was too expensive and there was not enough money.\(^{124}\)

\(^{123}\) Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 160.

\(^{124}\) Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.
Hassan mentioned the sanctions put on Iraq after the Gulf War and the effect they had on society as people had nothing. He said, “The Iran/Iraq War we lost people and everything, but people still had their ethics. The sanctions killed even the fabric of the Iraqi society. You have people who used to say I will feed you with what I feed myself, but during the ten or eleven years of the embargo, it turned to I will eat before I think of you.” He talked about how generous people used to be. When his neighbor built his house, he did not have to spend a dollar because the whole neighborhood helped. His neighbor only had to hire a builder, and the neighborhood were the employees. And when one house was finished, they would do the same for those who helped. Now, he mentioned the greed of the people, and said, “They are selfish, they think only of themselves. That’s worse than war. War comes and goes, but the ethic and the moral of the people is more important.”

People learn from their leaders, act as they see their leaders act, and do what they see their leaders do. In a place like Iraq where the leadership is selfish, violent and brutal, this only perpetuates violence, revenge, greed, and distrust. Kanan Makiya writes in his book, *Cruelty and Silence*, about Iraqi behavior during their occupation of Kuwait. He says, “The whole thing was violence for the sake of violence, destruction for the sake of destruction and killing for the sake of killing. The country has been literally sodomized. A new word should be coined for what was done to Kuwait: ‘Saddamized.’ Yes, Kuwait has been Saddamized.” He further writes of the rebellions that followed Kuwait that, “Victims imitated the regime that had created them.”

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125 Hassan, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015.

People’s anger following the Gulf War turned to rebellion. It was predominantly in the south of Iraq, and mostly among the Shi’i communities. The Shi’is had been prohibited from openly practicing their religious rituals and customs, their electricity cut, and the majority were considered as being from the disadvantaged section of the population. They had nothing else to lose. In March 1991, they turned their anger against their leader and were as violent as he had been. The rebels attacked anything that represented the regime. They attacked the mayor’s office, Baath party headquarters, as well as the security forces. Property was destroyed; shops were broken into, and looting. Phebe Marr writes that there was shooting for twenty-four hours in Basra. In the various towns throughout the south of Iraq there was considerable bloodshed, and bodies left in the streets.127 There were also uprisings in the north, among the Kurds who had also been repressed and treated brutally by Saddam. Kanan Makiya, from letters and interviews writes that further north in Sulaimaniyya, Baathist officials were pushed off buildings, their bodies shredded with knives by the crowds on the streets. People were seeking revenge for the atrocities they had lived through, for the use of chemical weapons in Halabja.128

Just as Saddam had been raised by a violent family who taught him to steal and to survive by his wits, he promoted revenge and violence to take what they needed or wanted by force. He taught his people to trust no one, to be suspicious of everyone, and to always be in fear of him. The 1991 uprisings did not last long. The army reassembled, and Saddam quickly put down the rebellions. Ahmed remembered this time. He was

127 Marr, History of Iraq, 244-245.
128 Makiya, Cruelty, 88-89.
sixteen years old, and a big truck and car came into his town. “They said the Iraqi army is coming from Saddam and everyone over 15 years old must come to a certain place by 5pm. All the people came out, they went to that place, and then like 20,000 people were killed. I was lucky because I didn’t go out. This happened in every village, every town, in all the Shi’i state.”129

Saddam’s treatment of his people had a lasting impact on them, one that will take generations to heal. He killed and tortured anyone that threatened him, regardless of religion, political party, and even family. He executed two of his sons-in-law for betraying him, the doctor who operated on his son because he mentioned the operation to someone. It did not matter who you were. Ahmed said, “Saddam killed everything, the birds, the animals, the trees.”130

Kanan said, “The constant living in fear and the abuse is manifest in the deep distrust that exists between people. It increases suspicions on all sides. You’re used to constantly looking over your shoulder. You get used to living in that world where neighbor informed on neighbor because we’re forced to. And now these habits, they don’t just go away instantly because a dictator is gone. They need time.” When asked if Iraqis could overcome this he said, “I think we’re looking, for Iraq really to emerge from this, it’s a generational issue. It’s like Germany after World War II. It’s worse than Germany after World War II, after all, the Nazis were only in power for 12 years. Saddam and the Baath were in power for 35 years.”131

130 Ahmed, interviewed by author, Alexandria, VA, November 9, 2015.
131 Kanan Makiya, phone interview by author, December 2, 2015.
Noor said, “Iraqis live in the past. They remain in the atrocities and the unfairness of the past. It’s like people have a mental block. They can’t see past yesterday to figure out how to fix it tomorrow. They live in fear, paranoia, and distrust. Saddam’s spies are everywhere and Saddam randomly shows up at people’s homes and checks if his picture is on the wall and sits to eat with them.” She also said, “Families would spend all their resources to get a child out of Iraq but that they would then have to come up with a believable lie, and that everyone would have to believe it and tell the same story. People’s lives become lies.”

When asked how to get away from this fear, Yasir admitted he still has a little bit of that fear left. He said he got away from it when he moved to the U.S., but it still exists. He said, “I still have that belief that the government can do everything. Sometimes I don’t want to talk bad about the government because maybe they will take me one day if I do. I know there is freedom in America and I can say whatever I want but still I have fear a little bit of Saddam, because Saddam can do anything.”

While talking about how to overcome the fear people have because of Saddam and his regime, Ali said, “To overcome that fear you have to have a strong government, and you have to have a strong judiciary. A strong government will need to build trust with the people. Right now, with the corruption, people don’t love their government. They are being led in a bad way.”

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132 Noor, interviewed by author, Ft Belvoir, VA, February 17, 2015.

133 Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.

When asked what years of conflict do to a society, Yousuf said, “People become desperate, they have no loyalty. They lose identity. People just give up. We always talk among family and friends, and we ask each other, have we been happy in our country? No. What about our fathers, grandfathers? No. It’s all the same. They all lived through conflicts. So, all the good brains, they left. Absolutely, 99.9% of the immigration of the Iraqis is because of the conflicts and the unstable lifestyle throughout history. My grandfather was displaced, my father was killed by Saddam, and I left Iraq.”

Yasir mentioned the lack of hope that existed in Iraq. There is no hope for the future. They go to college, maybe they find work, but maybe not. If you know someone, or can bribe someone, then getting a job is easier. He said people in Iraq do not have any goals. This is the life they are used to.

Noor also mentioned how they are not trained to think ahead because they are always in survival mode. When you live like that you think, ‘Well I’m worried about today and tomorrow, we never think to consider retirement. I don’t know if I’m going to live until I’m 50 where we come from.” She said, “We don’t have this mentality of long life span because you’re going to get killed, or you’re going to die because of lack of medical supplies. The world is just not developed back there. You really don’t feel safe that you’re going to live to see your grandkids, or great grandkids like here. I think that contributes to the attitude of, if you don’t live today what is it that you’re saving for, for tomorrow. That’s why they’re abusing the system, and taking advantage.”

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136 Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.
137 Noor, interviewed by author, Woodbridge, VA, December 5, 2015.
The 2003 U.S. invasion brought the downfall of Saddam’s regime and opened up new opportunities for the people and the government. However, for a civilization that had not experienced democracy or peaceful transfers of power between opposing groups, this posed a problem for a people who were increasingly being divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. Ahmed said the Americans made a mistake having elections so soon. Under Saddam, they could not vote for anyone else. They did not have freedom to have a real election. “When you give people freedom suddenly, it makes a problem for us, because not all the people know how to use this freedom in the right way. They used their freedom in the wrong way, and elected the wrong people.”138

When asked why Iraq has not been able to successfully function as a society and government, Kanan said,

I think the biggest single factor to explain the current situation is 33 years of an extraordinary dictatorship. Imagine a population that is stuck in a concentration camp, policed by the most awful guards, subjected to the most awful abuses for 30 years. Someone comes along after 30 years and knocks down the doors of that camp. That population remains abused and the memories of that abuse are carried with it. All Iraqis today are victims and they are all victimizers. This wasn’t true before 1968, this happened over time beginning with the Baath and it began with all the wars that this country has waged. Over a million people have died in war of one kind or another. At least 180,000 Kurds were genocidally wiped out. These are very large numbers and they completely shaped a population, changed a society. A society that goes into this kind of abuse is not the same society that comes out of it.139

Following the U.S. invasion, there were celebrations in the streets of Iraq. There was also looting and chaos. People did not know how act. There were no longer any security forces to police the people and help them behave. They had never been free before. Korwan pointed out that many believed freedom meant they could do anything,

139 Kanan, phone interview with author, December 2, 2015.
say anything they wanted, but such attitudes caused more misunderstandings and hatred as people said whatever they wanted about whoever, or whatever religion they wanted.\footnote{Korwan, interviewed by author, Manassas Park, VA, February 5, 2016.}

There have been two Kurdish presidents in Iraq since the formation of the new system of government. However, authority over the executive branch rests with the prime minister. There have been three Shi‘i prime ministers since 2004. Since the constitution does not include any rules on term limits, Nouri al-Maliki held the position of prime minister for eight years. Despite the president being a Kurd, Nouri al-Maliki excluded Sunnis and Kurds from his government, and was strictly Shi‘i oriented. Under pressure from the President Fuad Masum, al-Maliki stepped down and Haider al-Abadi took over as prime minister in 2014.\footnote{BBC News, “Iraq Profile - Leaders,” \textit{BBC News}, August 11, 2015, \url{http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14544543} [accessed January 30, 2016].}

Sami describes Haider as a powerless personality. He said, “It’s another failure and the problem is, it’s no matter who comes from the same party that the U.S. brought up. They all still adhere to the U.S. agenda. Iraq needs a total change, the constitution is wrong. The people in power came to milk Iraq for its oil revenues and Iraq is on the brink of bankruptcy. Iraq hasn’t been rebuilt; there is nothing left. The infrastructure is still suffering, hospitals, schools, highways, everything needs to be rebuilt.”\footnote{Sami, skype interview with author, December 11, 2015.}

When asked about the new government, if it could be trusted, Noor, Ahmed, Ali, Hassan, Yasir, Yousuf, Sami, Kanan, Korwan, and Shahnaz all said no. They all agreed that the new government officials were corrupt, that they only focused on their own needs, and the needs of their party. They take the money for themselves and are not
interested in caring for the needs of the people. The people in power are not competent to lead the government. Most of them gained power because of the atrocities they had endured under the hand of Saddam, not because of any skill or trait they possessed. Noor mentioned that they can watch the Iraqi Parliament on TV. She said the Parliament includes both Shi’is and Sunnis, and a few Christians. “They fight amongst themselves, the Shi’i asking for more chairs to lead, and the Sunni asking what’s left for them, and they keep battling with each other. The Shi’i in the past never had any formal power, and now in their mind, it’s time for payback. I think in this mentality we can never let go.” Noor also said, “The new Iraqi government stayed in the Green Zone and as the Americans were getting less and less, they stayed where Saddam stayed and kept a checkpoint to protect them. So, there is a wall between them and the regular people.”

Yousuf believed the government still has the mentality of before 2003. All the leaders lived away from the country as they were on the run from Saddam. They still have this mentality of being on the run. When asked if some of the greed that exists in the government is because of self-preservation after living under Saddam, he said he thinks it is. “They only plan to be in the position for a few years and plan just to take care of their family, get some money, and then get out. They know no one will come after them.”

Ali talked about the judiciary system. The law is weak, and there is no way to prosecute anyone for corruption. So, if you cannot stop the corruptor, how do stop the corruption? He said, “Al-Maliki is the head of the corruption, he didn’t stop it.”

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143 Noor, interviewed by author, Woodbridge, VA, December 5, 2015.

further stated, “The first problem in Iraq is the terrorists, and the second problem is the corruption. Corruption is like a cancer. It’s something from the inside you can’t see it. The terrorists, you can fight them because you can see them. One day we will beat them, no question about it. We will beat them before we beat the corruption.”

Ahmed pointed out with all the oil Iraq has they should be the richest country but instead they are among the poorest. He said in Basra, the oil just bubbles up because there is so much of it and the ground is black. However, Iraq will likely declare bankruptcy this year or next because of what Saddam did to the country and the corruption that has followed his regime.

Yousuf said the new government is following the heritage of the Baath, but are not as bad. He said it is all the heritage of Saddam; it is all people know. “Our schools, our lifestyle, everything was in one style under a dictatorship for so many years that the new generation got the same way. There are still revenge mentalities in the government.”

As the 2003 war dragged on, and violence and corruption spread, people began to lose hope in a free Iraq. People who had seized the opportunity to work for the U.S. and other foreign entities in Iraq, found themselves threatened by al-Qaida, as well as Shi’i terrorists groups such as the Badr Corps and Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM). Yasir worked for a non-government organization made up of Americans, Italians, and Canadians helping to restore the marshlands that Saddam had drained to seek out people who were trying to

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146 Ahmed, interviewed by author, Alexandria, VA, November 9, 2015.
rebels against him. Yasir loved this job, but found himself being threatened and finally went to his boss and said he had to leave. He said there is no future in Iraq. It is hopeless.\footnote{Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.} Ahmad worked for the American forces and also had to leave because of the terrorism in Baghdad and the threats against him.\footnote{Ahmed, interviewed by author, Alexandria, VA, November 9, 2015.}

When asked what all this conflict and violence has done to society, Yasir said he just thanks God that he is not crazy. He said some people went crazy but they just got used to it. He said, “We’re like normal people on the surface, but maybe if you go deep you will see the craziness. I would go my way to work and I would see bodies in the street. I see people killing each other in front of me, people dying from bombs. There’s a lot. Every time I leave home, I don’t know if it’s going to be the last time I see my family. It definitely affects me.” He watched his best friend be shot with four or five bullets by terrorists because his friend refused to cut his hair. He said, “You hate everything. You just want to die because there is no life. It affected a lot of people.”\footnote{Yasir, interviewed by author, Fairfax, VA, December 4, 2015.} Ahmed said many people feel old and sick. Someone who is thirty years old will have white hair like an old man. He said, “It destroys our life from the inside.”\footnote{Ahmed, interviewed by author, Alexandria, VA, November 9, 2015.}
People and societies are shaped by their history and what they experience. How they react to these experiences and how they teach their children to act influences the identity of the society and its politics. Kanan talked about the distrust and suspicions that existed between people, and having to always look over their shoulder. These are things that parents would have also passed on to their children in order to protect them from the brutal dictator they were living under. However, this also perpetuates the cycle of distrust and suspicion between people and on the society. Living through hard experiences can make a society stronger, more resilient, or it can leave it hopeless and broken.

Iraqis are survivors. They have learned to adapt and make do with the little they have. Hassan said that while he would not wish the things he went through on anyone, he still thanks God for it. He said it made him strong and he can survive anything now, and help other people to survive. However, he also said that the war and the conflict has destroyed Iraqi society, and that Iraq is no more Iraq.\(^\text{152}\)

Iraq has survived almost continual conflict since its creation as a nation-state and even before. Kanan mentioned that all new countries face hardships and struggles as they figure out their new government and society.\(^\text{153}\) Iraq is under a hundred years old, but the conflict it has faced and life under an extreme dictator has nearly torn the country and the

\(^{152}\) Hassan, interviewed by authoer, Fairfax, VA, December 10, 2015.

\(^{153}\) Kanan, phone interview with author, December 2, 2015.
people apart. Saddam has done the most to destroy whatever identity Iraq may have had. With the deep divide between the different ethnic and sectarian groups in Iraq, the lack of security forces, and their unwillingness to work together they are open and vulnerable to new threats by extremists who are seizing territory and killing the people. Korwan once believed there was still a hope for an Iraqi identity, but with the existence of ISIL in Iraq, he has lost that hope.154

Based on interviews of Iraqis, Iraq is bankrupt and will probably soon re-divide into three federalism, similar to what existed under the Ottoman Empire. However, as Korwan pointed out, with everyone being divided and untrusting of each other, who will control the money and will they disburse it fairly among the different groups? How will they maintain security against extremists and protect their borders? Will they turn and fight each other?

Bibliography


