

Torn Between Two Worlds: Iraqi Shi'is in the Twentieth
Century

by

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INTRODUCTION

A popular theme in analyses of the current War in Iraq is that the United States decapitated Iraq by deposing Saddam Hussein, thereby unleashing a sectarian rivalry that has engulfed the country ever since. Those that support this analysis tend to argue that the Sunni-Shi'i conflict dates back hundreds of years, previous Iraqi leaders were somehow able to repress the divide, and the Americans were foolish to ignore the sectarian powder keg that lay dormant before the invasion. Had the American government seen the writing on the wall, they would have known that sectarian tensions had been boiling beneath the surface, the product of an ancient sectarian religious disagreement over the descendants of Mohammed.

The explanatory power of this claim lies in what it purportedly elucidates, namely, sectarian conflict in Iraq. The three dominant parties in the Council of Representatives of Iraq are (as of April 2008) the United Iraqi Alliance, a coalition of Shi'i parties, the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, and the Iraqi Accord Front, a Sunni coalition. Further evidence for sectarianism lies in the fact that the most popular non-sectarian party, Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National List, holds just eight percent of the seats in parliament. Parliamentary statistics, of course, are a bit unnecessary in the face of sectarian political violence. Police and security services are almost exclusively Shi'i, American labeled "insurgents" are almost exclusively Sunni, and "death squads" are Shi'i groups who avenge Sunni violence. The violence has become so divided on sectarian lines that Baghdad, a city that once housed an equal percentage of Sunnis and Shi'is, is now less than thirty-five percent Sunni.

The eruption of violence and its rapid polarization along sectarian lines, however, does not necessarily imply that the same tensions and identities existed

before the war, and this is the question I will explore in this thesis. To be sure, the identities of Sunnis and Shi'is existed before the creation of the Republic of Iraq, and Sunni domination of Iraq has long been a factor of resentment for Iraqi Shi'is. But these identities, I will argue, have changed drastically throughout the twentieth century. Massive simplifications of Sunni and Shi'i identity that claim religious history as the primary determinant of the conflict fail to take into account the changing dynamics of tension between the two groups throughout the twentieth century.

Arguments about identity generally fall into two camps, the primordialists and the constructivists. With respect to the Middle East, the primordialists are best represented by Bernard Lewis. Lewis's 1990 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," coined the term "clash of civilizations" and argued that Islamic history had informed an inherently anti-Western consciousness among Muslims. This resentment, according to Lewis, is rooted in the decline of the greater Islamic empire and even the beginnings of Islam itself.¹ The Islamic World clashes (and has always clashed) with the Christian West because the Islamic World is the Islamic World and the Christian West is the Christian West. Lewis does not explicitly argue that identity cannot change, but he does believe that the most fundamental part of Islamic identity has not changed in the last hundred years. Terrorism enacted against the West is therefore simply the expression of long-felt resentment.

¹ Lewis, Bernard. "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990.

Lewis has not written extensively about Shi'is or the Sunni-Shi'i conflict, but his limited treatment of Shi'is reveals his bias for religious explanations rather than historical or sociological ones. His only book that deals directly with Shi'is, The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam, does not address Shi'ism as a whole but rather a small subset of it. Other writings focus on the original religious differences between Sunnis and Shi'is and treat the historical relationship between the sects as a natural consequence of the schism. This view traces the roots of the Sunni-Shi'i conflict to Sunnis' acceptance of the Caliph Abu Bakr and the Shi'is allegiance to Imam 'Ali. Scholars like Lewis take the first display of Sunni dominance over Shi'is, the martyrdom of Hussein, to have set a precedent for future Sunni dominance in the Middle East.

This ideological tract has found an increasing number of adherents since the American invasion of Iraq and the subsequent sectarian violence. On January 24, 2007, conservative talk-show host Bill O'Reilly remarked:

That's what they want to do in Iraq... the Sunni and Shia want to kill each other. They want to blow each other up. They want to torture each other. They have fun. This is – they like this. This is what Allah tells them to do, and that's what they do.²

It is, of course, a gross disservice to Bernard Lewis to compare him to Bill O'Reilly, but O'Reilly's ideas reflect a growing tract of analysis promulgated by people like William Kristol and Lawrence Kaplan.³ The shared idea that the removal of Saddam Hussein has unleashed centuries-old sectarian tensions has clearly gained traction in

² *The Radio Factor with Bill O'Reilly*, Westwood One. (New York: WOR-AM), January 24, 2007.

³ Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (Bob Land: Amazon Reminders Account, 2003).

the American media and small segments of academia. For those who find it politically expedient to claim the inevitability of such a conflict, Bernard Lewis provides the accompanying analytical framework.

This construction of a continuous narrative of Muslim identity has its roots in nineteenth century writings on nationalism. European Nationalists created deterministic narratives of their (desired) nations in order to justify the formation, consolidation, or unification of their states. Faced with a collection of disparate provinces and principalities, Italian nationalists drew on ancient Rome to create a teleological narrative of Italy's past that would conclude with the creation of the modern Italian state. In Germany, romantic nationalists like Johann Herder cited the unique Teutonic character of German-speaking people in order to form a single German state. As Giuseppe Mazzini of Italy wrote in 1858, one should "say not *I*, but *we*...the country is not an *aggregation*, but an *association*."⁴ The ideological seeds planted by Mazzini's cohorts would eventually culminate with early twentieth century fascism, and, more subtly, primordialists like Raphael Patai and Bernard Lewis.⁵

Lewis's primordialism has drawn considerable criticism from other scholars of the Middle East. These constructivist scholars are best represented by Edward Said, an outspoken critic of Lewis and author of *Orientalism*. Said's well-known argument posits that the orientalist, a group that includes Lewis, distort their studies of the Middle East due to inherent biases regarding race and ethnicity. Furthermore, the close relationship between orientalist and policy makers has perpetuated

⁴ Mazzini, Giuseppe, *The Duties of Man* (Paris: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), 90.

⁵ Patai, Raphael, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Hatherleigh Press), 2002.

colonialism and the colonial mindset, inhibiting Middle Eastern development since at least the nineteenth century. According to this argument, Arab identity has been particularly damaged by scholars like Lewis because they impose their weak understandings of a “permanent” identity on their area of study. Arab identity has not been the same since the dawn of Islam, and (in Said’s view) much of its recent negative transformation is the fault of the West rather than the East.

If Bernard Lewis and the European Nationalists are intellectually linked, Said’s scholarly relative is Benedict Anderson. For Anderson, identity is fluid and ever-changing, susceptible to generational processes of identity creation that are informed by a variety of factors. Where the Italian Nationalists argue that a common thread existed between ancient Rome and 1850s Italy, Anderson would disagree; the evocation of ancient Rome, not the history itself, was the real influence on Italian identity. As James Gelvin writes, “nations and concomitant national identities are constructed, and while they are not constructed from whole cloth... they are constructed none the less.”⁶ There are no natural continuities between the past and the present, no static groups, and no deterministic factors. It is therefore possible, following Anderson’s theory, that the current relationship between Sunnis and Shi’is is a modern creation. The past only influences the present insofar as present actors manipulate it.

The history of Shi’i identity in Iraq suggests a compromise between these two positions. Shi’is make up ten to fifteen percent of the world’s Muslims, and while

⁶ James Gelvin, "Modernity and its Discontents: On the Durability of Nationalism in the Arab Middle East," *Nations and Nationalism* 5, no. 1 (1999): 73.

they account for the majority of the population in Iran, they are a minority in the Arab World.⁷ Yitzhak Nakash's study of the formation of Shi'ism in Iraq reveals that most Arab Shi'is are relatively recent converts. Shi'ism first appeared in Iraq around the seventh century in Najaf and Karbala, the burial sites of the Imams 'Ali and al-Hussein.⁸ It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, that the majority of Iraq's southern inhabitants were converted to Shi'ism.⁹ Because of their recent conversion, Iraqis Shi'is are not direct inheritors of stereotypical Shi'i identity and history. Like most Shi'is, they have been historically dominated by Sunnis, but they are a new group with a storied tribal history that predates their Shi'ism. As Nakash notes, Iraqi Shi'is were observably much closer to Sunni Arab tribesman than to their Persian coreligionists at the dawn of the twentieth century. This makes the question that lies in the background of this thesis, the question of why Iraqis split along sectarian lines after 2003, even more difficult to answer. If Shi'is in Iraq previously identified along tribal lines rather than sectarian ones, what has changed?

Although this thesis will not attempt to answer that question in full, it will seek to chart the formation of Iraqi Shi'i identity in the twentieth century. Other historical studies of Iraq, of which there are sadly few, do not generally emphasize the sectarian issue. Hanna Batatu, Phoebe Marr, Amatzia Baram, and even Charles Tripp either deny the existence of a Shi'i identity in the twentieth century or fail to account

⁷ Nasr, Vali, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 34.

⁸ Nakash, Yitzhak, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 22.

⁹ Nakash, Yitzhak, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

for all the factors that led to its development.¹⁰ More recent scholars like Yitzhak Nakash and Faleh Jabar have given Iraqi Shi'is more attention, but neither has attempted to chart the course of their changing identity: Nakash is concerned with the beginnings of Shi'ism among Arabs and Jabar deals with Shi'i opposition groups. Some of the neglect for Iraqi Shi'is is born out of the difficulties of doing historical research in Iraq. Saddam Hussein's regime was notoriously hostile to outside intellectuals, and the Ba'athist regime's denial of sectarian grievances stood solidly in the way of any scholarly work on Shi'is. This is also the reason for the unfortunate dependence on several sources in this thesis. The Shi'is of Iraq deserve more intellectual attention, but their lack of attention thus far makes original research quite difficult.

This thesis will draw on other studies of Iraq to analyze the relationship between Iraqi Shi'i identity and the political paradigms of the twentieth century. The independence of the Iranian religious establishment and the dominance of Shi'i Islam in Iran has led to Iran's rise as the center of Shi'ism under the Safavid and Qajar dynasties. Unlike Shi'is in Iran, however, Shi'is in Iraq are Arabs. With their religious authority in one country and their ethnicity in another, Iraqi Shi'is often find themselves torn between two worlds. Shi'i clerics at the start of the century "found themselves exposed to a dual conflict of loyalty: on the one hand, they preached Shi'ism in a state not homogeneously Shi'a and were thus drawn into the historic antagonism between Sunni and Shi'a; on the other, as *Arab* Shi'a they were suspected

¹⁰ Tripp, Charles, *A History of Iraq*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 298. Tripp writes that "there is no more a single Shi'i narrative in Iraqi politics than there is an Iraqi one itself."

by their Arab rulers of succumbing to non-Arab (in other words, Persian) influence.”¹¹ The concept of being torn between two worlds is one that has been discussed with regard to other groups or countries as well; in Latin America, where the worlds are “Spanish” and “indigenous” ones, and in Russia, where the worlds are European and Asian. This debate is alive in well in Iraq today (as of April 2008). Underlying the fight between the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigade is the fact that Muqtada al-Sadr is Arab and Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, who maintains close ties to Iran, is Persian. The act of supporting a political figure is therefore constitutive of their identities as Iraqi Shi’is.

Constructing a narrative of Shi’i identity with respect to international paradigms helps chart the influence that different “worlds” have had on Shi’i allegiance to the state. Twentieth century Iraq provides three interesting test cases for how identity forms in different circumstances. Chapter One deals with the period from 1920-1941, when an outside power controlled the country through direct and indirect colonial rule. Although a broad Sunni-Shi’i alliance formed in the Revolt of 1920, Britain’s strong hold on power kept the Shi’i community fragmented and prevented any attempted expression of sectarian interests. After World War II, however, a second era began as colonial power waned across the broader Middle East, as addressed in Chapter Two. Iraq became an independent international actor on the regional stage with its foreign policy in the hands of its own government; domestic politics and international politics, which had been previously divided, now

¹¹ Peter Hünseler, "The Historical Antecedents of the Shatt al-Arab Dispute," in *The Iran-Iraq War: An Historical, Economic and Political Analysis*, ed. M.S. El Azhary (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 9.

became intimately intertwined. The proximity of foreign policy to domestic politics, the rise of political liberalism, and the infusion of international ideologies led to a more cohesive expression of Shi'i identity during this time. Political barriers to participation remained, but Shi'i involvement with the Communist Party unified many of the disparate Shi'i elements of the 1920s and 1930s. This would last until the third period, 1968 to 1988, which saw the Ba'athist regime, the Iranian Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War alter the course of Shi'i identity formation, as discussed in Chapter Three.

The Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War altered the international paradigms in the Middle East. The Pahlavi Shahs' emphasis on Persian ethnicity, Iran's friendly relations with Israel and Turkey, and the denial of Islamic imagery kept Iran on the periphery of the Middle East. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 broke from the past in all three areas. Ayatollah Khomeini's anti-Western stance and his calls for Muslim unity brought Iran politically into the Middle East, so much so that Saddam Hussein launched the Iran-Iraq War out of fear that the revolution might spread to Iraqi Shi'is. For Iraqi Shi'is, this seemingly forced them to choose between their identities. Shi'is could choose their ethnicity and ally with an otherwise resented Sunni regime, or they could side with the Persian Shi'i orthodoxy and betray their Arab heritage. Shi'is chose to remain loyal to Iraq, but not overwhelmingly so. It was a decision rooted as much in fear as in national loyalty. The strong Ba'athist state reversed the Shi'i political unity of the 1950s and returned Shi'is to their previously fragmented state under the British Mandate. If 1920-1941 was the era of

foreign colonial domination and 1941-1968 was the era of international participation, 1968-1988 was the era of internal state domination and war.

Another important factor in this narrative of Shi'i identity is the growth of the state. It is hard to ignore the enormous growth of the Iraqi state that saw the loose colonial dominance of the British Mandate morph into Saddam Hussein's strict totalitarian state in the 1980s. Iraq was hardly a state at its inception. Not only had it been created out of the ashes of the feeble Ottoman Empire, it was also pieced together artificially from the remnants of three provinces. Yet by the time the Ba'athists took power the state was both an elaborate network of patronage and the largest employer in the country. During the Iran-Iraq War, measures were taken to create a mythical Iraqi identity that could subvert the very existence of a separate Shi'i identity. The growth of the state gave the government the tools with which to control and manipulate the identities of its citizens. Shi'is were politically suppressed from the outside under the Mandate, but once the Ba'athists took power, the suppression was internalized. The ability of the state to divide the Shi'i community without the help of an outside power was the direct result of the rise of state power.

The connection this thesis makes between international political paradigms, the growth of the state, and Shi'i identity can be taken as both an exercise in political analysis and a historical study. By dividing twentieth century Iraqi history into three distinct eras, we reach the conclusion that political liberation leads to cohesive expressions of identity for Iraqi Shi'is. Generalizing this argument, we can assert that political participation of minority groups has a unifying ideological effect for their communities. The inverse of this argument, that the best method for a state seeking

to suppress a domestic group is outright political dominance and cooption, can also be deduced from this study. This conclusion accords with Benedict Anderson's thesis that a strong state with control over the dissemination of information has the largest effect on domestic identities. When faced with the power of either their state or another, Iraqis could not unify in opposition despite their numbers. When offered a chance to participate on the political and international stage, however, they came together in a way unseen until the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Although this connection to political theory is apparent, this thesis is primarily a historical narrative. As a narrative of how Shi'i identity has changed over time (in relation to several factors), it does not lend itself well to clear-cut and generalized political conclusions. The truth is more nuanced. Each era is a bit of an abstraction, each factor is hard to isolate from other variables, and perhaps most importantly, each era and factor are unique to the time and place of their occurrence. Iraqi Shi'is are a unique group. Their experience and their reaction to the twentieth century does much more to educate us about the past than to inform our theories of the future. In writing about Iraq, we cannot assume that our conclusions will hold true outside of Iraq, or even for the future of Iraq itself.

CHAPTER ONE:
FROM SAN
REMO TO
WORLD WAR I

The Revolt of 1920

Iraq was created out of three Ottoman vilayets, or provinces – Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul. As with many postcolonial states, Iraq was born on European negotiation tables, this time through the British and French correspondence of the Sykes-Picot agreement and in subsequent negotiations in Sèvres, France and Sanremo, Italy. Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul were very demographically diverse, and their fusion into a single state would have severe repercussions for the British in Iraq.¹² Even more ominous is the effect that the formation of Iraq would have on the future of Sunni-Shi'i relations within the country.

The event that lies at the center of the creation of Iraq is the Revolt of 1920. Not only did the Revolt of 1920 demonstrate resistance to British interference in “domestic” affairs, it was the first and possibly last time that genuine cooperation would occur between large numbers of Sunnis and Shi'is. The events that defeated the Revolt are equally important. The cooperation of Ottoman-educated Sunnis and landed tribal shaikhs with British authority foreshadowed a century of power politics that led to deep-seated feelings of resentment between the two sects. For the Shi'i, the Revolt of 1920 has come to represent the first act of betrayal in a long century of unfair treatment by Sunnis. There is strong Shi'i feeling that “Iraq was born in sin.”¹³

The Revolt of 1920 demonstrates that the primary paradigm of identity was vaguely religious and cultural, an identity that helped unite Sunnis and Shi'is against

¹² Cleveland, William L., *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), 191.

¹³ Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, 86.

the British. Because the world of post-Ottoman politics was new, later distinctions between Iraqi nationalism and pan-Arabism were not yet apparent and varying forms of identity were united by their common cause against colonization. Religious leaders of both sects were instrumental in leading the Revolt, but religion functioned more as a common cultural attribute than a doctrine for governance. While Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'is looked for things that united them, the downfall of the Revolution and the subsequent British administration revealed the divisions in Iraqi society that the Revolt was unable to bridge.

Iraq remained a deeply tribal society at the start of the twentieth century after nearly four hundred years of off-and-on Ottoman rule. Tribes were particularly strong in the south, where many of the large tribes were recent converts to Shi'ism.¹⁴ Mass conversions occurred in response to the rise of the Wahhabis in the Arabian Peninsula; after Ibn Sa'ud sacked Karbala in 1801, the ulama in Najaf felt pressure to convert southern tribes to Shi'ism for protection. These tribes were accustomed to the freedom from governmental interference that was buttressed by the inconsistencies of the Ottoman state. Without a strong central government, the arbitrary nature of Ottoman intervention in Iraq reinforced the tribal system of conflict and resource management.¹⁵ Given the strength of the tribes and the big tribal sheikhs who led them, their primary concern was to retain the status quo, and as the Revolt of 1920 would show, the cultural chasm between the tribes and the more metropolitan cities of Baghdad and Basra was easily exploited by the British.

¹⁴ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 28.

¹⁵ Vinogradov, Amal, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3, no. 2 (1972): 127.

In the cities and towns, Ottoman (and Persian) influence was much more notable. Amal Vinogradov notes that profound socio-economic changes were taking place in Iraq, including Ottoman educational reforms that resulted in a growing Sunni elite. The modernized elites were also not completely separated from the countryside, as changes in communication, transportation, and crop demand led to increased links between the tribal areas and Baghdad.¹⁶ Shi'i mujtahids, or Islamic legal scholars, were located primarily in or around the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala.¹⁷ These "shrine cities" had strong links to Persian Shi'i centers like Qum and Isfahan, part of an intellectual and religious network that cut across sovereign state borders. European powers had negotiated special status for all foreigners in Ottoman territories, and Persians took advantage of this law to move freely in and out of Iraq. In 1919, about 5% of Shi'is in Iraq were Persian.

Pan-Islamic sentiments began to flourish in Iraq following the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the First World War, giving birth to the ideas that drove the Revolt of 1920. The Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1906-1911) was driven by the strong connections between bazaar merchants and Iranian mujtahids. As a result of policies adopted by the Qajar dynasty, Iranian mujtahids had more political power than their Iraqi counterparts. Not only did the success of the Constitutional Revolution lead to the growing image of Iraqi mujtahids as opposition leaders, it sparked political debate in the shrine cities as well.¹⁸ Often religiously

¹⁶ Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics," 129.

¹⁷ Mujtahids are Shi'i religious scholars who have obtained a degree of study that allows them to practice ijtihad, or the process of making decisions through independent interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

¹⁸ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 55.

repressed under the Ottomans, Shi'i mujtahids began to abandon their previously quietist stance and embrace political involvement by drawing on the revolutionary example of Persia.¹⁹

Ironically, this would happen first in support of the Ottomans, demonstrating the fluidity of revolutionary movements at the start of the twentieth century. As they began to lose World War I, the Ottoman Empire increased its calls of pan-Islamism and gave unprecedented freedoms to the Iraqi ulama, or the community of educated Islamic scholars. After the British captured Basra in December 1914, Shi'i ulama called for jihad against the British and allied with Ottoman forces to recapture the city.²⁰ The decisive three-day battle of Shu'ayba saw tribal and religious forces defeated by the British, and the battle has lived on in Shi'i lore as an example of Shi'i bravery for the Iraqi national cause. Later in 1918, lesser Shi'i ulama (but none of the leading mujtahids) revolted against British authority in Najaf under Captain Marshall.²¹ The irony of Shi'i support for the Ottomans is obvious. Rather than ally with the British in an attempt to win more freedoms that they lacked under the Ottomans, they accepted the calls for Muslim unity. This unity, however, did not extend as far as their coreligionists in Persia, who were encouraged in a *fatwa* in 1910 to "preserve the independence of the Ottoman state, to defend its sovereignty, and to protect its frontiers from foreign intervention."²² Regardless of their mistreatment, Shi'i mujtahids felt threatened by any breach of the status quo by the British. It should be noted, however, that support for the Ottomans was not universal. Although

¹⁹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 23.

²⁰ Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²² Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 434-36.

Shi'i ulama issued a *fatwa* for jihad against the British, lay Shi'i in Najaf and Karbala rebelled against the Ottomans in 1915 and 1916 respectively.²³

Calls for Arab unity expanded in Iraq during the First World War, particularly among Sunnis in Baghdad. The famous 19th century founder of Islamic modernism, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, spent several months in Baghdad and the shrine cities. Among his disciples was the poet 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Kazemi, who criticized the Ottoman administration and changed al-Afghani's message of Islamic modernity into a call for Arab unity. As Syria rose as the center of pan-Arabism, Iraqi journalists in Baghdad commented regularly on the editorials published in Syrian newspapers such as al-Muqtabas and al-'Urfan.²⁴ Unlike the pan-Islamism promoted by the Ottomans, pan-Arabism targeted the Ottomans as corrupt and responsible for the backwardness of Arab lands. Sunnis were conspicuously absent from revolutionary anti-British activities until 1920, perhaps because of the appeal of Western modernism advocated by scholars like al-Afghani.

The pan-Islamism of Shi'is and pan-Arabism of Sunnis began to unite the provinces before the Iraqi state was created, laying the foundations for Iraqi nationalism. Before the British mandate, Baghdad did exert "a certain gravitational pull" on Basra and Mosul. Political, and to a lesser extent, social unity was impossible under Ottoman rule, but once the Sykes-Picot agreement made it clear that Britain planned on consolidating the three provinces, anti-British activists began to

²³ Jabar, Faleh A., *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2003), 65.

²⁴ Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics," 129.

accept Iraq as a single state.²⁵ A February 1919 petition, one of many similar opposition documents, asked for an Arab administration “bound by a national legislative assembly based in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq.”²⁶ Claims that Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul had nothing in common before 1920 are therefore only partially correct; Iraq did not exist before the British made public their intention to create a Mandate, but once this proclamation was made, anti-British activity began to be organized around “Iraqi” nationalism and independence.

The significance of the Iraqi focus of action for the anti-British movement illustrates how foreign actors were able to influence domestic movements in Iraq even when those movements were opposed to foreign intervention in the first place. Opposition to the Mandate did not accept a British administration, but it did accept the geographical entity drawn up by the British, or at least found it useful for organizational purposes.²⁷ In addition, this demonstrates that there was no actionable feeling of provincial unity in the Ottoman provinces, as no effort was made to ensure Basra or Baghdad’s statehood.²⁸ It would take a conflict with the Iraqis to establish a British administration, but the idea of Iraq was imposed without a fight. In this respect, early Iraqi nationalism shows similar characteristics to the Shi’i reception of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and Sunni pan-Arabism. Iraqis accepted what foreigners told them their identity was and organized around those impositions.

²⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 29.

²⁶ Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 65. The petition is found in *Self Determination*, FO 248/1250.

²⁷ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 42.

²⁸ This was a little different in Mosul, where Kurdish nationalism demanded an independent Kurdistan at the Treaty of Sèvres.

On January 19, 1919, Karbala mujtahid Mirza Mohammed Taqi Shirazi submitted the following petition signed by other prominent mujtahids, sayyids, and other Karbala religious functionaries:²⁹

We the people of Karbala... have decided to seek the protection of the Arab-Islamic banner and we have selected one of the sons of Sharif Husayn to be an Amir over us bound by an assembly elected by the people of Iraq [to] enact the rules approved by the clergymen of this nation and [to administer] its affairs.³⁰

One month later, forty-five Shi'i and Sunni ulama issued a petition that stated:

We, the representatives of Islam from among the Shi'i and Sunni population of Baghdad and its suburbs... have opted for... an Arab state ruled by an Arab Muslim king, one of the sons of... the Sharif Husayn.³¹

These petitions are notable for several reasons. Two groups emerged in the Revolt of 1920, the Sharifians, who supported the Hashemite dynasty of the Sharif of Mecca, and the mujtahids, who sought Iraqi independence and were generally influenced by pro-constitutionalist mujtahids in Iran.³² Not only did Shi'is and Sunnis collaborate in demanding an Iraqi state, but Shi'i ulama endorsed a Sunni Arab for King as well, showing that the key difference between the British and Sharif Hussein was Islam. In both documents, however, the identities of Arab and Muslim are intertwined: the "Arab-Islamic banner" is to be defended by an "Arab Muslim king." "Muslim" and "Arab" were not concrete or limiting definitions, and their conflation suggests that the

²⁹ Sayyid is a title given to males who are accepted as descendants of Muhammad.

³⁰ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 64.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

³² For a list of Sharifian officers, see: Pool, David, "From Elite to Class: The Transformation of Iraqi Leadership, 1920-1939," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 3 (1980): 334-335.

most prominent and most alluring aspect was their non-Britishness. Sunni-Shi'i collaboration in 1920 was religious, but only ostensibly.³³

The emphasis on Arabism in particular was instrumental in rousing support among the southern Shi'i tribes. As Yitzhak Nakash writes,

In order to create a common denominator that would help mobilize Arab Sunnis and Shi'as, the speeches and writing of members of the two groups emphasized the disgrace of Arab honor, a symbol to which Arabs in Iraq could relate well and which had no connection to their sectarian identity.³⁴

The concept of muruwah, or Arab manliness, resonated with many southern Shi'i because they were recent nomadic converts to Shi'ism. Arab poetry traditionally spoke of honor and was used very heavily as a call to arms, although some poetry in Baghdad advanced more Islamic themes.³⁵ Sunnis and Shi'is in Iraq made the first steps towards their alliance in 1910, when joint proclamations against the Italian invasion of Libya drew heavily on pan-Arab themes.³⁶ That Sunnis and Shi'is found unifying factors such as muruwah and a glorified racial identity is not surprising. What is surprising is what was contrasted with these identities. As opposed to later pan-Arabism in Iraq, being Arab was not contrasted with being Persian, but rather with being European.

Although Sunnis and Shi'is collaborated in the Revolt of 1920, the early identification with sectarian religious structures reveals that these groups remained at

³³ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 23.

³⁴ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 69.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 70. The poet 'Ubaydi wrote, for example, that "the shari'a of Mohammed has united us/ and it rejects the Western mandate."

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 58. From *Al-'Ilm* 1 (1911), 434-36.

the nexus of identity politics throughout the resistance to the Mandate. The group Al-Ahd al-Iraq, made up of Sunni Arab officers, declared independence in March 1920, but few recognized their authority until they were joined by a large Shi'i group, the Independence Guard (Haras al-Istaqlal) led by Mohammed al-Sadr.³⁷ The Independence Guard itself was a shaky coalition of Shi'i bazaaris, ulama, and civil servants united by their demand for Iraqi independence.³⁸ The momentum and legitimacy gained by the opposition movement when the Independence Guard joined Al-Ahd al-Iraq reveals a type of collaboration and identity forged by a common enemy. Sunnis and Shi'is gathered in Baghdad mosques starting in May 1920, but not until sectarian parties on both sides agreed to cooperate.³⁹ Cross-sectarian collaboration was secondary. Identifying as an Iraqi or an Arab could only take place after original identification with a local sectarian party or organization.

Armed revolt broke out in Iraq after news of the San Remo Conference reached the country in May 1920.⁴⁰ The agreement, which echoed the earlier Sykes-Picot correspondence, gave Britain the right to exercise "direct control" over the newly established Mandate of Iraq.⁴¹ The immediate cause for rapprochement between Shi'is and Sunnis was the death of the Shi'i Grand Mujtahid al-Yazidi, whose funerary ceremony was converted into a mass political rally. Ramadan, the Sunni holiday of Mawlid and the Shi'i performance of Ta'ziya drew mixed audiences

³⁷ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 40.

³⁸ Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics," 134.

³⁹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 41.

⁴⁰ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 68.

⁴¹ Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 153.

that often ended in marches through Baghdad.⁴² After Shi'i Ayatollah al-Shirazi issued a fatwa declaring service in the British administration unlawful, armed revolt broke out in June 1920 in both Baghdad and Basra.⁴³ The prominence of religious ceremonies and fatwas in instigating the Revolt corroborate the idea that the main form of identity for Iraqis was a fluid blend of religion and culture. Some have argued that Shi'i leaders supported the Sharifians in order to establish a theocratic Shi'i state, but Shirazi's fatwa makes it clear that the goal of the jihad was to prevent non-Muslims from ruling Muslims.⁴⁴

The goals of the opposition movement were stifled by the (mostly Shi'i) tribal shaikhs. Threatened by mass movements and seeking to ensure their position in society, tribal shaikhs in Kut and 'Amarah turned to the British to guarantee their landholdings, effectively ending the Revolt of 1920.⁴⁵ The big tribal shaikhs and educated Sunnis in Baghdad were the primary beneficiaries of British rule, but the temporary unity among large numbers of Sunnis and Shi'is is remarkable for what it tells us about the early stages of identity formation among Shi'is in Iraq. The ease with which Shi'is identified as Arabs and Muslims shows that neither one of these identities was either exclusive or concrete. Rather, they were cultural qualities shared by most Iraqis that could unify them against the British. On a local level, Shi'is turned to mujtahids or lesser ulama for their political organization, but national collaboration between the groups was founded on their common opposition to Britain.

⁴² Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics," 135. Mawlid is the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Mohammed, and ta'ziya is a performance of the death of Imam Hussein, usually performed during Muharram.

⁴³ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 41.

⁴⁴ Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics," 136.

⁴⁵ Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, 77.

Foreigners influenced Shi'i identity in several ways during the Revolt. Pan-Islamic, pan-Arab, and pro-constitutionalist ideas entered Iraq from abroad, and the very concept of Iraq as a geographical entity was accepted from the British. Whether the Mandate was taken as a *fait accompli* or seen as a useful tool for resistance organization, 1920 saw the muted debut of Iraqi nationalism in opposition to the British Mandate.⁴⁶

After 1920

If the Revolt of 1920 was a spontaneous and fluid expression of multiple identities by the Shi'is, the ensuing setup of power began a slow process of identity consolidation. Calls for Iraqi independence died with the creation of the British Mandate, as did the once lofty language that accompanied the Revolt, now replaced by more pragmatic and political exegeses. The alliance between tribal shaikhs and the British demonstrates that cleavages among Iraqis undermined the solidarity and unity achieved in 1920. The Revolt had revealed the conflicts between rural Shi'is and urban Sunnis. The subsequent incorporation of urban Shi'is and tribal shaikhs further fragmented the Shi'i community and prohibited any collective response to Sunni power.

The international paradigm of power during the period from 1920 to 1941 was one of colonial dominance. British presence in Iran and the French occupation of Syria prohibited any regional rivalries from gaining enough momentum to influence

⁴⁶ Vinogradov, "The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics," 125.

domestic Iraqi politics. Rather than focus on foreign relations, politics was dominated by domestic appeals to the British, who became a resented but accepted authority. Political power was cleverly manipulated by King Faisal and the British, who were able to strongly influence the leadership of the Shi'i community. Mujtahids, who had been the main informer of Shi'i identity in 1920, found themselves rapidly discredited by the British.

Much has been made of the British organization of power in the Mandate and its long-term effects. While it is important to recognize the profound implications of Britain's actions in ensuring long-lasting Sunni power, the motivations for those actions were less sinister than they are usually portrayed. To be sure, the British feared Shi'i empowerment because of their experience in 1920 and possibly because of their experience in Iran, where the Shi'i clerics resisted British interference in the Tobacco Protest in 1890. But the deciding factors in placing the Iraqi government in Sunni hands originated in a different place and a different time. One deciding factor came from the Arabian Peninsula, where the British still had promises to keep in the aftermath of the Arab Revolt. The other came from the previous Ottoman administration, which had ensured that Sunnis, by virtue of their education and bureaucratic competency, were the only Iraqis capable of administering a state.

Arnold Wilson, the influential British Acting Civil Commissioner, wrote that installing Feisal was a "good solution...bringing him to Iraq would prevent him and his coterie from fighting the French in Syria and thus endangering British-French

relations.”⁴⁷ Aside from concerns about French colonial power, Feisal’s appointment was a reward for his opposition to the Ottomans in World War I. The British were more than happy to install him as King after his experience in Syria taught him the benefits of collaboration with Britain and the perils of associating with Arab nationalists. After the Revolt of 1920, a leader who would represent their interests and had no connection to any of the revolutionary parties was desirable. It is possible that the British favored a Sunni leader because of their experience with the Iranian Tobacco Protests in 1890, but this is unlikely. Feisal was chosen for his experience, his views on the British Mandate, and British concerns about the political layout of the Middle East.

Immediately apparent in the British Mandate was the domination of Sunnis in ministerial and bureaucratic positions. While the British were certainly suspicious of the Shi’i following the Revolt, they had little choice but to appoint Sunnis in senior government offices. The Shi’is had been excluded from the Ottoman education system and officer corps, and while well-to-do Sunni Baghdadis sent their children to Istanbul, Shi’i families sent their children to the religious seminaries in al-Najaf, Karbala, al-Kazimayn and Samarra.⁴⁸ Faced with an already established class of professional bureaucrats, the British staffed their government accordingly.⁴⁹ The result was a class of Sunni ex-Ottoman officials who were both well suited to government positions and more than willing to cooperate to restore their pre-Mandate status. The only place where significant Shi’i administrators held office was the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁸ Marr, Phebe, "The Development of a Nationalist Ideology in Iraq, 1920-1941," *Muslim World* 75, no. 2 (1985): 85-101: 88.

⁴⁹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 222.

shrine cities; even in Basra, the British could rely on Naqib and other Ottoman officials for their loyalty.⁵⁰

The consequences of this concentration of power were devastating to Shi'is. All of the Prime Ministers from 1921 to 1941 were Sunnis who had graduated from the War College in Istanbul and aided Feisal in the Arab Revolt.⁵¹ The exclusion of Shi'is in the formative years of the state virtually guaranteed that Shi'is would face an uphill battle against their underrepresentation in the decades to come. In the 1920s, very few important government positions were in Shi'i hands, yet by 1930 this number had only increased to 15%.⁵² As will be discussed in the following chapter, Iraq did not have a Shi'i prime minister until 1947, twenty-eight years after the establishment of the British Mandate. The period between the two World Wars was one of identity struggles and gradual political gains.

The most reverberating consequence of the Revolt of 1920 for Shi'is was the decline of the mujtahids as the chief representatives of Shi'i identity and political demands. Not only did the mujtahids' support for the Revolt discredit them among some Shi'is, it also aroused suspicion within the government.⁵³ The mujtahids did not accede to the British quickly. For nine months after the Revolt, it was impossible to hold elections in Karbala because of strong fatwas against participation in the state. As Charles Tripp writes, Feisal "was sovereign of a state that was itself not sovereign," and he faced a nearly insurmountable task of consolidating the many

⁵⁰ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 45.

⁵¹ Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 196.

⁵² Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 109-10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 75.

groups within Iraq following his inauguration.⁵⁴ Yet by June 1923 he had negotiated two successful diplomatic agreements, bargaining down the Anglo-Iraqi treaty to four years and facilitating Turkish withdrawal from Mosul, giving him enough political capital to face the mujtahids. Mahdi al-Khalisi, a senior mujtahid, initiated an anti-election campaign replete with personal attacks against Feisal. Armed with his recent gains in political legitimacy, Feisal concentrated on the delegitimization of the mujtahids.⁵⁵

Feisal's method of attack against the mujtahids was through the existing Law of Immigration, which would set a strong precedent for Shi'i identity by conflating Iranian identity with Shi'i loyalty. Most of the mujtahids were Iranian nationals, so Feisal amended the Law of Immigration in June 1923 to permit the deportation of foreigners who were discovered to be involved anti-government activity.⁵⁶ Under the Ottomans, many Arab Shi'is took Iranian nationality in order to escape taxation or conscription, and the new amendment applied to them as well.⁵⁷ Mahdi al-Khalisi, though Arab, was deported in 1923 and long negotiations between the government and the mujtahids followed. It quickly became apparent that the mujtahids were negotiating from a position of weakness, and they were widely embarrassed before they returned to Iraq in April 1924. By then, Khalisi had died of apoplexy and the Anglo-Iraqi treaty had been ratified.⁵⁸ The mujtahids were discredited and the tactic of questioning the nationality of Shi'is was born.

⁵⁴ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 49.

⁵⁵ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 81-2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 81-2.

⁵⁷ Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, 86.

⁵⁸ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 83.

Feisal and the new government also sought to break the power of the mujtahids by courting the large tribal shaikhs who had previously been hostile to Baghdad. The shaikhs' hostility to British rule was first mollified during World War I, when the British guaranteed landholding rights in exchange for political support. The shaikhs, for their part, sought to ensure their communal primacy in the face of gradual but significant social changes that had been building since the late Ottoman period. The growth of the cities should have lessened the importance of the shaikh, but a more powerful central government helped a new, commercial class of shaikhs emerge.⁵⁹ As Hanna Batatu writes, "life was pumped into [the tribes] artificially by an outside force that had an interest in its perpetuation."⁶⁰ The government granted them tax exemptions and the British guaranteed special representation for the shaikhs by giving them nearly 40% of the seats in the Constituent Assembly.⁶¹ Shaikhs retained their importance, but for different reasons.

By making the shaikhs dependent on the government for their power and income, Feisal sought to bring an authoritative group of Shi'i leaders under and reliant upon the state. The effects of this policy were apparent in 1926, when the recently returned mujtahids asked the tribal shaikhs to sign a petition asking for the return of the two mujtahids still exiled from the country. With the patronage system starting to draw the shaikhs into its orbit, they rejected the mujtahids' request and refused an alliance between the two groups.⁶² Shi'is were no longer united in

⁵⁹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶¹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 56.

⁶² Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 91.

opposition to the state. Land-owning tribal shaikhs made up an increasing share of parliament, from 20.5% in 1933 to 36.5% in 1953.⁶³

In addition to offering them seats in the Constituent Assembly, Feisal's government also institutionalized tribal shaikhs by creating a governing structure that relied upon preexisting tribal networks. Shaikhs were made responsible for the collection of revenue and the establishment of security within their territory, becoming the only connection between the government and rural areas.⁶⁴

Euphemistically dubbed the "gesture toward self-determination" by Lord Curzon, local Divisional Councils were set up "to secure the full benefit of co-operation by tribal leaders and large landowners" and to train Iraqis for the National Assembly. They were overwhelmingly staffed by tribal shaikhs; nearly seventy percent of Diwaniya, Samara, and Hilla's councils were shaikhs.⁶⁵ Shaikh's interests were further cemented by the Law Governing the Rights and Duties of Cultivators in 1933, which tied peasant serfs to their landlords until they had completely repaid their debt. For an economy largely based on debt incurred for future crop seed, this legislation effectively enslaved peasants and provided tribal shaikhs with a virtually inexhaustible supply of labor.⁶⁶ By inviting tribal shaikhs to participate in the government and offering them incentives to do so, Feisal and the British were able to distract Shi'i shaikhs from pursuing sectarian issues in favor of more regional and tribal ones.

⁶³ Eppel, Michael, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 2 (1998): 243.

⁶⁴ Pool, "From Elite to Class: The Transformation of Iraqi Leadership, 1920-1939," 341.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 345.

Aside from the fragmentation of the Shi'i community, the inclusion of tribal shaikhs into the governing structure preserved the existing structure of society for both the Sunni ruling class and the Shi'i tribal shaikhs. By institutionalizing tribal power within the new state structure, the British recreated positions of authority for the shaikhs as economic and social changes in Iraq threatened tribal structures.⁶⁷ In return, Feisal and the British accomplished two of their goals. First, they were able to balance the powers of the Sharifian urban officers who opposed the British Mandate by creating an effective loyal bloc in the National Assembly. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, they were able to give themselves legitimacy by tying their power to land, the single productive resource and source of wealth in Iraq. As David Pool writes:

An alien monarch and a group of professional soldier-politicians without followers controlled the positions of central government through which resources were distributed. They had no natural followers like the tribal shaykhs nor had they any power, status or wealth independent of the state. On the other hand, the tribal shaykhs were the accepted (or in some cases imposed) leaders of rural society... the two were largely complementary.⁶⁸

This is illustrated well in the case of Yasin al-Hashimi, Prime Minister in 1935 and 1936. A Sunni born to a poor urban family, he built up a personal following through the al-'Ikha party by granting concessions and tax dispensations to land-owners.⁶⁹ Shi'i identity had been informed principally by mujtahids and lesser ulama in the Revolt of 1920. By incorporating tribal notables into the ruling elite, the Shi'i tribal

⁶⁷ Ibid., 340.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 344.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 346-7.

threat was neutralized and the internal chasm between Sunnis and Shi'is was overshadowed by a more apparent split between rural and urban areas.⁷⁰ International politics had largely dictated the early formation of Shi'i identity by creating a British foil for the loose Islamism and Arabism of 1920. Now the British had exploited a different division within Iraq to supplant the old one. The period between the two World Wars saw a confused, decapitated Shi'i community that found itself forced to focus on the internal workings of the state.

From 1923 onwards, Shi'i grievances would be voiced by secular Shi'i groups who sought to work within the state rather than against it.⁷¹ This period can be viewed as a moderate success for Shi'is in Iraq; while they never achieved representation that would come close to approximating their numerical majority, their position in the government grew and they were able to gain moderate political power. Although Shi'i representation in the government doubled from 18% in the 1920s to 36% in the 1950s, it never comprised more than half of the total ministers in the government.⁷² Sunnis ensured that Shi'is would never outnumber them by creating two official posts every time one was needed, one for a Sunni and one for a Shi'i. Yet while the Shi'is never had enough power to defeat any ad-hoc Sunni coalition, their efforts to increase representation mark a change in emphasis. Convinced of the inevitability of British rule and the impossibility of changing it, Shi'is organized within the state and focused their demands on winning domestic political successes. In 1927, a Sunni government employee published a book critical of Shi'ism and the

⁷⁰ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 421.

⁷¹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 57.

⁷² Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 127-8.

Iraqi army fired shots during a Shi'i Muharram procession, sparking protests that were closely tied to the Shi'i Nadha Party. The political power of the protests was so great that Yasin al-Hashimi, the Prime Minister, was forced to resign later that year.⁷³ The change in Shi'i political strategy (and the acknowledgment of previous failure) also came in 1927, when Shi'i politicians and mujtahids in Najaf repealed the *fatwa* against government service.⁷⁴

This change was actually apparent as early as July 1923, when Shi'is became surprisingly nostalgic for British rule rather than the dominance of a Sunni administration.⁷⁵ Shi'is appealed to Bourdillon, the Acting High Commissioner, and asked:

We know we are uneducated and so cannot at present take our proper share in the public services. What we want is British control, to save us from Sunni domination, until our sons are educated; then we, who are the real majority, will take our proper place in the government of our country.⁷⁶

This about face was most evident among the urban Shi'i in Baghdad and Basra. Shi'i Baghdadis issued another apology for their previous opposition to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, commending the British for its "firm stand against the mujtahids".⁷⁷ The vague identity that fostered temporary unity between Sunnis and Shi'is was based on common opposition to the British. While this philosophy sought to suppress differences in order to ally against the outside power, British presence was such that

⁷³ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 63.

⁷⁴ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 118.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

internal groups soon cooperated with the outside power to further their own interests within Iraq.

Another governmental policy carried out to weaken the mujtahids was the incorporation of Shi'is in the Ministry of Education. To satisfy Shi'i demands for more involvement in the government, Shi'is were awarded more posts and began to dominate the Ministry of Education by the mid-1930s.⁷⁸ Following the notorious Sunni pan-Arab Sati al-Husri, who was despised in Shi'i circles for his heavy-handed tactics, Shi'is like Mohammed Fadhil al-Jamali were responsible for the widespread expansion of education to Shi'i areas.⁷⁹ Despite being Shi'i, ministers like Jamali held Husri's secular pan-Arab beliefs and injected their ideas into the education system, thereby eliminating the religious education preferred by the mujtahids. The importance of this massive expansion in education should not be underestimated. Between 1930 and 1945 the number of pupils at the secondary level increased sixfold, and elementary schools grew by a factor of ten between 1914 and 1937.⁸⁰ The eventual effects of this policy would be felt in the 1940s and 1950s, but in the 1920s and 1930s, the Ministry of Education represented the decline of the mujtahids' power among Shi'is. As early as 1929, when the government founded a girls school in Najaf, the ulama's protests against it were easily dismissed. One high official noted, "with the advance of education and knowledge... the influence the ulama at present exercise over the more ignorant people is bound to be weakened with a consequent

⁷⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁸⁰ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 233.

falling off of their income.’”⁸¹ The Shi’i community was fragmented between the mujtahids, powerful tribal shaikhs, and Baghdadi Shi’i ministers.

The increased involvement of Shi’is in the Ministry of Education and the pan-Arabism promulgated in Iraqi schools were not just means for diminishing the power of the mujtahids. They were also genuine attempts to foster a sense of nationalism among the many disparate groups and loyalties in monarchic Iraq. In 1933, Feisal himself lamented:

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.⁸²

Feisal’s frustrations with Iraqi society (or lack thereof) led to his aggressive education policy that actively sought to incorporate Shi’is and bridge the sectarian divide.

Admission into government service was eased, and promising young Shi’is were offered an accelerated training program that allowed them to attain higher positions more quickly.⁸³ In later years, when Feisal and Nuri al-Said held power, the Iraqi state attempted to force nationalism on the population through education and conscription.⁸⁴ Feisal may have been eager to break the power of Shi’i religious leaders and weaken the existing Shi’i identity, but he also wanted to build up a new brand of Iraqi identity to replace it.

⁸¹ Iraqi Public Security *File No.* 2198 entitled “Girls’ School in Najaf.” Found in Hanna Batatu, “Shi’i Organizations in Iraq: Al-Da’wah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin,” in *Shi’ism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan Cole and Nikki Cole (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 189.

⁸² Al-Hasani, A. R., *Tarikh al-Wizarat al-Iraqiyya (The History of Iraqi Cabinets)* (Sidon: al-Irfan Press, 1952), 289.

⁸³ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 25.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 336.

The issue of conscription in the late 1920s also saw the birth of a new political tactic: the questioning of Shi'i commitment to the Iraqi state in order to induce cooperation on legislation. King Feisal's amendment to the Immigration Law in 1923 had already set a precedent for conflating Shi'ism with Iran, but the conscription debates were the first time that Shi'is across Iraq were asked to confirm their commitment to the state. The idea for universal military service was promulgated by the effendi class of Baghdadi officials who sought to emulate and universalize their experience at the Ottoman military academy. Sati al-Husri believed there was a need for a "social education" that would foster nationalism and develop "a spirit of mutual cooperation and obedience".⁸⁵ This was extremely unpopular in Shi'i and Kurdish areas due to fear of Sunni domination and a lack of enthusiasm for the strong Ottoman-style nationalism espoused by Husri. By 1934, however, the rhetoric surrounding the issue had made it "a litmus test for [Shi'i and Kurdish] national commitment as Iraqis".⁸⁶ Faced with the apparent decision of confirming or denying their commitment to the Iraqi national cause, Shi'is in Parliament allowed the bill to pass in 1934 after several years of tough opposition. The slow process of Shi'i incorporation had ended.

King Feisal's death in 1933 ended a period of limited reconciliation between Sunnis and Shi'is and ushered in an era of more conspicuous domination by Sunni elites. To be sure, Feisal himself had always been limited by the Baghdad network of Sunni effendis that held most ministerial positions. In February 1933, for example,

⁸⁵ Marr, "The Development of a Nationalist Ideology in Iraq, 1920-1941," 92.

⁸⁶ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 116.

the popular Shi'i Jafar Abu al-Timman was dismissed when Sunnis like Nuri al-Sa'id became fearful of his following.⁸⁷ Al-Timman's alienation from government reinforced the impression of a Sunni-dominated state, demonstrating that although Feisal made overtures towards Shi'is, he was ultimately dependent on Sunni power in Baghdad. Feisal had, in addition to awarding small benefits to Shi'is, acted like "a safety valve" for both sects because of his strong personality and close connections with the British.⁸⁸ His death marked the disappearance of an important nationalist voice that was immediately apparent. In September 1934, new Prime Minister 'Ali Jawdat al-Ayyubi dissolved Parliament and immediately excluded many Shi'is from the ensuing election. That Shi'is were a majority in a minority-dominated state was never more obvious.

The loss of Feisal's ability to negotiate between different groups was clear in 1935, when Shi'i tribal shaikhs united with Sunni opposition groups in defiance of the government. Bakr Sidqi was eventually sent in to crush the rebellion among southern tribal shaikhs, who turned to violence because of their heightened concerns about conscription and a feeling of sectarian disrespect.⁸⁹ But the 1935 Revolt is not just notable for the disenfranchisement of the Shi'i tribal shaikhs. It is also notable because it demonstrates that Shi'i unrest and violence had become a political tool to be used by both sects, especially the Sunni opposition. Prime Minister 'Ali Jawdat rigged the elections to exclude many prominent Shi'i tribal shaikhs, specifically 'Abd al-Wahid al-Hajj Sikkar, which led to a united opposition between tribal shaikhs and

⁸⁷ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 79.

⁸⁸ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 120.

⁸⁹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 87.

Sunni opposition groups. Sikkar presented himself as a Shi'i advocate and the opposition actively encouraged a revolt in southern tribal areas.⁹⁰ After Al-Ayyubi resigned and Jamil al-Midfa'i failed to crush the rebellion, Yasin al-Hashimi formed a government in March 1935 and ended the tribal rebellion within a week.⁹¹ Hashimi was actually a proponent of increased Shi'i participation in the government, but resented resorting to violent means to accomplish political objectives.

The 1935 Revolt is important because it illustrates the effects of Feisal's departure from power. The tribes appealed to the new King Ghazi to intervene before the revolt began. Ghazi's failure to act forced the tribal shaikhs to resort to extra-governmental means to accomplish their goals, thus cementing violence as a "vehicle to which people resorted in an attempt to influence governmental policies."⁹² The very fact that Shi'is turned to violence to accomplish their goals within the governing structure demonstrates how the precarious political situation had affected their identity during this time. Britain's strong hand in domestic politics fostered a sense that protests against the existence of the state would be useless. Nevertheless, with political avenues largely cut off for Shi'is, they lacked both the unity and the methods to argue for greater political participation without breaking the law. Fifteen years of vague pan-Arab rhetoric in Baghdad and Ottoman-style education had also made some Shi'i politicians like Ja'far Abu al-Timman and Mohammed Rida al-Shabibi reluctant to embrace the Shi'i cause during the revolt.⁹³ The slow increase in Shi'i representation was very detrimental to Shi'is because it made real progress tantalizing

⁹⁰ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 121.

⁹¹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 83.

⁹² Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 125.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

for Shi'i politicians who could have been influential under different circumstances. Unwilling to sacrifice their position, Abu al-Timman and others like him would not embrace the Shi'i cause out of hope that Shi'i participation would eventually reflect Iraq's demographics.

Sunnis' cognizance of the Shi'i dilemma is also clear in 1935. Shi'i unrest in the countryside became a political tool for both the Shi'i tribal shaikhs and the Sunni opposition. Hikmat Suleiman, finding himself out of step with Al-Ayyubi, could temporarily take on the Shi'i cause (or, more specifically, the Shi'i tribal shaikh cause) to his political benefit. Shi'i political violence was part of the game but was never so dangerous that it could actually threaten the existence of the state. After he brutally crushed the revolt, al-Hashimi alienated the Sunni elite and Hikmat Suleiman was installed as the new Prime Minister.⁹⁴ Al-Hashimi's violence against the tribal Shi'i was not grounds for his dismissal. It was his ambitions that merited such a response.

The start of World War II fundamentally changed the international political situation. For Shi'is, however, 1941 was another 1923. Much to the chagrin of the British, the late 1930s had seen seven military officers become so powerful that the entire political arena revolved around them. The British sought to find a replacement to the ubiquitous Nuri al-Said in order to curb the power of the military, but they were unsuccessful. In 1937, Jamil al-Midfa'i had been quickly ousted by the officers and replaced by al-Said, who was able to placate the officers largely because his strong

⁹⁴ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 88.

pro-Arab stance on Palestine resonated with their pan-Arab beliefs.⁹⁵ By 1941 this coterie was reduced to four officers known as the “Golden Square” – Salah al-Din Sabbagh, Commander of the Third Division, Kamal Shabib, Commander of the First Division; Mahmud Salman, head of the Iraqi air force; and Fahmi Sa’id, in charge of the mechanized forces. These officers, the pro-German Rashid ‘Ali movement, and the anti-British effendiyya in Baghdad brought about support for the Germans and a war between Iraq and Britain.⁹⁶ In May 1941, Britain landed in Basra and quickly defeated the Iraqi forces as they moved towards Baghdad. The “Golden Square” had grossly miscalculated, and politicians who had previously relied on Britain for their power, like al-Said, were rewarded for their refusal to support Germany.

Rashid ‘Ali’s forces could have benefitted militarily from the help of the Shi’i in the south. Notably, however, southern Shi’is did not respond to the government’s rallying cry and often aided the British forces in their conquest.⁹⁷ After the war, many Shi’i approached British officials and expressed a desire for increased British influence in Iraq and more Shi’i participation in the government. In the absence of a Shi’i state, they believed, British rule would be preferable to Sunni rule.⁹⁸ As in 1923, the Shi’i sought to enlist the help of the British in defeating the Sunni. And, as in 1923, the British rebuffed the Shi’i olive branch and relied on the prevailing Sunni network of rule after the war.

⁹⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 97.

⁹⁶ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 239-240.

⁹⁷ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 105.

⁹⁸ Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 127

Conclusion

To say that social change occurred in Iraq in the period from 1920 to 1941 would be a gross understatement. Iraq was born as a state and began to develop as a society, as early as the news of the Sykes-Picot agreement reached Baghdad in 1918. The formal creation of Baghdad in 1920 in Sanremo, Italy, was preceded by an anti-colonialist resistance movement that nevertheless accepted Britain's designation of Iraq's statehood. The Revolt of 1920 set an odd precedent for the future of Iraq and Sunni-Shi'i relations; sectarian cooperation reached its peak before the British Mandate reinstalled and codified previous Sunni dominance.

The ways in which Sunnis and Shi'is cooperated in 1920 are noteworthy. Shi'is organized around their religious leaders and most collaboration occurred in a religious setting, whether in joint fatwas or mass gatherings in mosques. Yet the rhetoric of the day was not exclusively religious. A pan-Arab motif is easily discernable in official documents, poetry, and speeches, including those given by the Shi'i mujtahids who fought for pan-Islamism. Being an "Arab" and a "Muslim" were common tools in the repertoire of Sunnis, Shi'is, religious and lay leaders. That religion and ethnicity complemented each other is a sign that these identities were nascent and fluid. Years later, when Islamists and pan-Arabs were diametrically opposed, such a blend would be impossible.

The most telling aspect of the Revolt of 1920 was the consolidation of these identities in the face of an outside power. The real bridge between different modes of identification was a common opposition to the British, the first of many cases in

which external powers influenced local sectarian identification in Iraq. It was not simply that both sects opposed British rule and united accordingly. Because the British were a new power and represented a break from the status quo, the sectarian consequences of British power were largely unknown, leading both Shi'is and Sunnis to fear that the other side might gain under a British Mandate. In contrast to future foreign affairs, when Egyptian or Syrian influence was seen as having a clear pro-Sunni effect, neither side could claim the British as their own. Sectarian cooperation was as much political as it was cultural, religious, or racial.

The British did, of course, choose a side. Possibly influenced by their previous experience in the Middle East but probably just acting out of necessity, they employed the ex-Ottoman Sunni coterie of professional bureaucrats to run their administration under the new Iraqi King, Feisal. The impact of the new Sunni administration was devastating for Iraqi Shi'is. Although they did experience moderate gains in ministerial appointments, Shi'is were never well represented from 1920 to 1941. The only Shi'is to gain a prominent voice in the government were the landed tribal shaikhs of the south, who managed to secure power and land through political deals with Feisal and the British that disadvantaged many Shi'is.

A point should be made here about British policy, which has occasionally been termed a "divide and rule" philosophy connected to supposedly similar policies in India, Malaysia, and Kenya.⁹⁹ British policy itself did not divide a hitherto united or cohesive Iraq society. Rather, by creating the state of Iraq, divisiveness occurred

⁹⁹ For Kenya, see: Caroline Elkins, "To understand Kenya's woes, think Britain," *Philadelphia Enquirer*, January 11, 2008, 13-14. For Malaysia, see: Abraham, C. E. R., *Divide and rule: The roots of race relations in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Insan), 1997.

through the opposition that formed against them. As the previous discussion of unified action against the British reveals, the creation of the British Mandate did more to foster nationalism (however unnatural the nationalism was, and however unintentionally the British acted) than to reject it. British policy was not to “divide and rule,” because while the British may have insured that Iraq remained divided, they hardly had to try. To be sure, if the British had truly wanted to create a cohesive society, they certainly could have done a better job in fostering intersectarian relations. But to call British policy during this time period “divide and rule” is to ignore the creation of Iraq and the fragmented society that the British inherited from the Ottomans.

Shi'i tribal shaikhs were a natural ally for the British and the new administration for several reasons. The agreement between Britain and the tribal shaikhs that effectively ended the Revolt of 1920 left the British with debts to pay, but the same political alliance proved useful to Feisal in balancing the urban Sunni Sharifians who sought to control him. The effect of the alliance imposed a different division within Iraqi society that transcended any developing sectarian one. Among Shi'is, the separation between rural and urban became insurmountable, and attempts at mass Shi'i movements were often defeated by Shi'i tribal shaikhs who depended on the government for their livelihood.

The other significant change in Shi'i identity was the decline of the mujtahids. In 1920, Shi'i religious leaders had been the nexus of local community action and the agents of collaboration with Sunnis. By 1930, however, this was not the case. Feisal's aggressive campaign against them was the first instance in which the political

tactic of questioning Shi'i national loyalty was employed. It worked so effectively and rapidly that mujtahids approached the government desiring reconciliation, retracting their previous fatwas and urging political participation in elections. Yet these actions carried little weight among Shi'is. The mujtahids' opposition to the Mandate government had alienated them from their constituents, preventing the previous religious identification that the mujtahids had enjoyed before 1920. Without the mujtahids as representatives, Shi'is had nowhere to turn, save the unresponsive and unrepresentative central government.

Shi'i attempts to work within the state are indicative of the omnipresence of British foreign power during this era. Many of the changes in Shi'i identity during this time were not just responses to British power, but responses to the general growth and centralization of the government as well. Education, land ownership rights, and other social-status issues became the realm of a state which sought to perpetuate Sunni supremacy but offered limited Shi'i improvement through incorporation. The fragmentation of the Shi'i community, for its part, allowed this incorporation to occur on Feisal's terms. The Shi'i may have had unprecedented influence in the Ministry of Education, for example, but textbooks still contained Feisal's brand of pan-Iraqism that ignored many sectarian complaints.

King Feisal's death in 1933 slowed the awkward process of political reconciliation between Shi'is and Sunnis. In the presence of the comparatively weak King Ghazi and Regent Abdullah, the period between 1933 and 1941 saw more conspicuous attacks against Shi'is. Uprisings increased, and although they reveal the degree to which Shi'i unrest could influence the government, they also reveal a new

tactic of sectarian manipulation. Sunni opposition parties could ally with explicitly Shi'i groups to cause trouble and dissolve parliament, thereby exploiting the previous grievances and differences that Feisal sought to eliminate.

The 1930s should be viewed as a period of social and political germination. The expansion of education into Shi'i areas was to have large social effects by the 1940s, and the beginning of Shi'i migration to the cities also caused future sectarian shifts in identity. In addition, the establishment of conscription drastically changed governmental power dynamics in a way that was visible by the late 1930s. Like the school system, the army created a new class of influential graduates who influenced the formation of the Iraqi state. Unlike the army, however, Shi'is never played the role that they did in the Ministry of Education.

Perhaps most important was the subtle growth of nationalism during this time. Early Iraqi nationalism should not be overstated, but the expansion of the central government under the auspices of a foreign power did help a specifically Iraqi identity emerge. This process was not as immediate or flashy as the nationalism that seemed to arise from the Revolt of 1920. King Feisal's frustration with the lack of a "common tie" was legitimate, but the effort of the central government to create such a tie was met with moderate success.¹⁰⁰ As for the old sectarian and tribal ties, "nationalism did not displace the old loyalties. Although it grew at their expense, it existed side by side with them."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 25-26.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

CHAPTER TWO:
FROM THE
REVOLT OF
1941 TO THE
BA'ATHISTS

Introduction: Demographic and Representative Changes

The aftermath of the Revolt of 1941 and the reinstatement of British power ushered in a new era in Iraq. Frightened of another revolt, Britain maintained its strong military presence and guiding hand in domestic politics for the remainder of World War II, the same presence that had largely stifled the free development of a distinct Shi'i identity. This changed when the war ended; Britain returned to the process it had started following Iraqi independence in 1932, easing control and gradually acknowledging Iraq's ability to handle its own affairs. These developments had enormous and unintended effects. The slow lifting of British power opened Iraq to the influence of regional and international ideologies that altered the identities of Shi'is and the relationships between the sects. The growing split between Pan-Arabism and communism, the two dominant ideologies of the 1950s, culminated in the Revolution of 1958. The fight between communists and pan-Arabs is especially notable because of what it reveals about the state of sectarian tensions during this time. Although the parties were nominally non-sectarian, tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is often lay below the surface.

The late monarchy period also saw conspicuous changes in Shi'i representation. Sunnis retained their dominance, but four Shi'is – Salih Jabr, Fadhil al-Jamali, Mohammed al-Sadr, and 'Abd al-Wahhab Mirjan – served terms as Prime Minister, an accomplishment that had never previously occurred. Shi'i ministerial appointments also grew during this time, as illustrated by the following table:

Table 2.1: Shi'i Ministerial Appointments, 1921-1958¹⁰²

1921-1932	17.7%
1932-1936	15.8%
1936-1941	27.7%
1941-1946	28.1%
1947-1958	34.7%

Shi'i representation nearly doubled between 1921 and 1958, with the only period of decline being 1932-1936. The periods directly preceding both the Revolt of 1941 and the Revolution of 1958 saw the greatest increases in the percentage of Shi'is in ministerial positions, at 11.9% and 6.6% respectively. For a demographically dominant group, the Shi'is still held comparatively little power. But at a time when challenges to the state were becoming more vocalized, Shi'i representation within the state was increasing.

Another important social change during this time was the massive migration of Shi'is to the cities, which was largely caused by the growing divide between the rural poor and the tribal shaikhs. The shaikhs' dependence on the state revived their position in society, but new legislation effectively enslaved the peasants and destroyed the shaikhs' previous protective role.¹⁰³ The result of this antagonistic relationship was a massive migration of rural Shi'is from poor southern provinces like 'Amara to the slums of Baghdad, Basra, and other urban areas. Baghdad was only 20% Shi'i before World War I, but the influx of migrants from the provinces made it over 50% Shi'i by 1958.¹⁰⁴ This migration had profound implications for Shi'i

¹⁰² Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 47.

¹⁰³ Pool, "From Elite to Class: The Transformation of Iraqi Leadership, 1920-1939," 345.

¹⁰⁴ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 97.

identity. Once in Baghdad, most migrants experienced an erosion of their religious piousness, and the proximity of such large numbers of Shi'is to Iraq's political center brought more attention to sectarian inequities in the government. Baghdad had exerted a slight gravitational pull on outer provinces even before the creation of Iraq, but this force grew throughout the 1930s and was much stronger after the Revolt of 1941.¹⁰⁵ In 1958, "the richest of the rich were often Shi'is, [but] so were also predominantly the poorest of the poor."¹⁰⁶

The period from 1941 to 1963 also saw the immense growth, consolidation, and centralization of the state. Baghdad had not been placed under martial law once from 1921 to 1941. From 1941 and 1958, however, martial law was invoked for a total of 2,843 days, or nearly eight of the final seventeen years of the monarchy.¹⁰⁷ While some scholars believe that the expansion of the powers of the central government had a calming effect on sectarian relations, the truth is more nuanced.¹⁰⁸ On one hand, public rapprochement between Sunnis and Shi'is reached its peak and popular uprisings ceased to fall on strictly sectarian lines. On the other hand, sectarian tensions could be felt below the surface of the pan-Arab and communist movements. When political tensions were low, sectarian barbs were muted, but they were often voiced in times of crisis.

In total, these broader changes had mixed effects on Shi'i identity and its susceptibility to international political paradigms. Isolating any one of these factors

¹⁰⁵ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 119.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁰⁸ Sluglett, Peter and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "Divide and Rule in British-controlled Iraq," in *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader*, ed. Marvin E. Gittleman and Stuart Schaar (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 142.

is difficult given their high degree of interrelatedness. The growth of the state, for example, was instrumental in distributing the monarchy's Arab nationalist message, and demographic changes that brought more Shi'is to urban areas also paved the way for the spread of communism. For Shi'is, the period from 1941 to 1963 was the most politically expressive in Iraqi history; they would never participate so freely in politics until the end of Saddam Hussein's rule. A strong British presence had kept the Shi'i community fragmented under the Mandate, but new access to political power led to a more unified Shi'i voice. Iraq's prominence in regional politics introduced international ideologies that helped build the first broad alliance of Shi'is with a somewhat cohesive identity.

Ideological Currents: Pan-Arabism

Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism began in moderate resistance movements against the Ottoman state in the early part of the 20th Century. Reacting to the Young Turk movement and the decline of the Ottoman Empire, thinkers such as Zaki al-Arsuzi and Michel Aflaq – both Arab Christians who later established the Ba'ath Party – began to promote a secular anti-colonialist ideology that pressed for the unity of the Arab World.¹⁰⁹ Arab nationalism emerged politically in 1916 when Hussein ibn Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, negotiated the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence promising Arab independence in exchange for a revolt against the Ottomans.

¹⁰⁹ Zubaïda, Sami, "Islam and nationalism: continuities and contradictions," *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 4 (2004): 410.

Although the correspondence was violated by the British and French Mandates established in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, it did result in the creation of the first independent Arab state in Saudi Arabia. Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism, while similar concepts, should be distinguished from each other. Arab nationalism is the belief that all Arab Nations are connected by a common language, history, and culture, while pan-Arabism is a movement for a single, unified Arab nation. The movements are closely linked because of their common anti-colonialism, but they are not synonymous. The difference between the two became more apparent in the 1950s, when pan-Arabs like Gamal Abdul Nasser fought for a unified Arab state against many Arab nationalists who opposed it.

Sati al-Husri, the influential Director of Education from 1923 to 1927, is often regarded as the founder of pan-Arabism in Iraq.¹¹⁰ As a Sunni Syrian who followed Feisal to Iraq, Husri advocated a single Arab state and was disdainful of Iraqi “particularism,” or Iraqi nationalism that did not extend beyond its borders. For Husri, language and history formed an unbreakable bond between common groups of people. He wrote:

The life of the nation is based on its language. . . . The nation which falls under the rule of a foreign power loses its independence . . . but it does not lose its life while it preserves its language.¹¹¹

While studying in Istanbul, Husri became inspired by romantic German nationalists like Johann Herder and was originally supportive of the Young Turk movement. He soon began to adapt many of the ideas of Ottoman and German nationalism to the

¹¹⁰ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 113.

¹¹¹ Marr, "The Development of a Nationalist Ideology in Iraq, 1920-1941," 90-91.

Arab World, and many of his policies while head of the Ministry of Education reflect this. Seeking to bridge what he perceived as a gap between Arabs, Husri hired many teachers from Syria and Palestine to teach Arab history in Iraqi schools.

The textbook required for Iraqi schoolchildren in the 1920s, Darwish al-Miqdadi's "The History of the Arab Nation" (*Tarikh al-Umma al-'Arabiyya*), illustrates Husri's promulgation of early pan-Arabism. The book's conclusion advocates unification, noting that "as Germany, the United States, and Italy achieved independence and [each] became powerful by unification of its states, so too, will we."¹¹² Husri's call for unity was not well received in Shi'i areas, where his secularism and his unwillingness to acknowledge the plight of Iraqi Shi'is made him extremely unpopular. As his insistence on pan-Arabism became conflated with his Sunni-centric outlook, and as Feisal offered Shi'is more posts in the Ministry of Education to offset the power of the mujtahids, Husri's political livelihood became untenable. In 1927 Husri was forced to resign from his position as the Director of Education. When he was later appointed Inspector General of Education he resigned under pressure after just three months in office.¹¹³ Opposition to Husri's brand of Sunni-centric pan-Arabism foreshadowed the future reaction of Shi'is to Gamal Abdul Nasser in the 1950s. The strong Shi'i dislike of Husri at this time may have even contributed to their later suspicion of pan-Arabism.

Pan-Arab ideology continued to dominate the Ministry of Education even after it was in Shi'i hands, revealing a new cleavage that developed among Shi'i.

¹¹² Ibid., 97.

¹¹³ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 125.

Fadhil al-Jamali, Husri's immediate successor in the Ministry, had an enormous effect on Shi'is and is widely regarded as an early symbol of successful Shi'i involvement in the Iraqi government. But Jamali's impact was the result of his expansion of education rather than his ideology; although his reforms resulted in more schools in Shi'i areas, he left Husri's pan-Arab doctrine intact.¹¹⁴ Raised in Baghdad and educated in Ottoman-style schools, Jamali had more in common with his Sunni compatriots than his Shi'i coreligionists. Jamali later became the third Shi'i Prime Minister of Iraq and he actively avoided sectarian politics by instituting policies that were of questionable use to those Shi'is who valued so-called "sectarian interests." In this respect, Jamali is representative of the new class of effendiyya, the group largely responsible for the spread of pan-Arabism in Iraq.

The effendiyya were young, urban, professional bureaucrats who rose to prominence through Feisal's meritocracy and played an integral role in Iraqi pan-Arabism. Unlike the elite, they often came from humble beginnings, and due to Feisal's attempts at reaching a sectarian balance in the 1920s they contained a high percentage of Shi'is. Because they owed their political power to their education and skills rather than their historical social standing, they occupied a tenuous position in society that fell outside the traditional frameworks of social status. They found themselves torn between two worlds; they retained some connection to the tribes, culture, and religion of their homeland, but they had also absorbed some reformist

¹¹⁴ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 233.

ideas and concepts from their Western schooling.¹¹⁵ With its European romanticism, secularism, and anti-colonialism, pan-Arabism straddled both arenas.¹¹⁶ At once intellectual and proletarian, pan-Arabism was an attractive ideology to the effendiyya. It borrowed from the West in order to oppose it.

The political elite, for whom the loyalty of the effendiyya was crucial, used this rhetoric to placate the identity crisis facing these new educated civil servants.¹¹⁷ The political elites themselves were hardly equipped to satisfy the reformist demands of the effendiyya. Nuri al-Said, who dominated Iraqi politics in the decade following the 1941 British invasion, never permitted reformist trends to influence the direction of Parliament and was content with the uneasy balance of power between himself, the regent, the tribal shaikhs, and the effendiyya.¹¹⁸ The regent, for his part, had none of the foresightedness that Feisal possessed and did little to curb Nuri's power.¹¹⁹ The result was an elite surrounding Nuri and the regent that exploited the effects of pan-Arabism in order to legitimize their rule.¹²⁰ Pan-Arabism was well-received by most Sunnis and not a few Shi'is, but its success is really attributable to the effendiyya and elite who brought it to the Iraqi political scene.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ For more on the concept of being "torn between two worlds" in this context, see Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005). This is slightly different from the previous use of the term

¹¹⁶ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 234.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹¹⁸ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 108. It is important to note, however, that Nuri al-Said opposed Pan-Arabism.

¹¹⁹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 345.

¹²⁰ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 419.

¹²¹ This argument is similar to the argument that European nationalism arose among the lower middle class civil servants and teachers. See Hroch, Miroslav, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Although pan-Arabism was supported by the Sunni elite and the effendiyya, it was much less successful among Shi'is.¹²² Most Shi'is were suspicious of pan-Arabism and, to a lesser extent, Arab nationalism because they feared that Arab unity would make them a minority in an Ottoman-style Sunni superstate.¹²³ Taha al-Hashimi, who became Prime Minister for two months in 1941, stated that "Iraqi Shi'is were against [Arab] unity, for they feared that should they be integrated with another Arab country... [and] their relative proportion would decrease."¹²⁴ There is some obvious irony in Shi'i opposition to pan-Arabism. Pan-Arabism was a secular ideology that sought to overcome sectarian and tribal affiliations in favor of a broader ethnic identity. These very sectarian and tribal affiliations, the "ethnocentric, centrifugal" elements of the Shi'is and the "anarchistic, decentralist" tendencies of the tribes, stood in stark opposition to this goal.¹²⁵

Shi'i reluctance to embrace pan-Arabism reveals the centripetal nature of Iraqi politics. The transition in strategy from opposition to the state to opposition within the state was made in the early 1920s, but it was so complete by the 1940s that Shi'is fought to preserve the status quo. While it is true that this choice may have been one of opposition to a pan-Arab state rather than one of support for an Iraqi one, it is important nonetheless. An optimistic hope for future Shi'i control obscured the fact that the central government kept political equality tantalizingly out of reach. In the

¹²² Sami Zubaida, "Community, Class and Minorities in Iraqi Politics," in *Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, ed. Robert Fernea and William Roger Louis (London, New York: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 1991), 203.

¹²³ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 134.

¹²⁴ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 134.

¹²⁵ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 235.

future, many Shi'is believed, the opportunity for power commensurate to their numbers might be possible. Alongside fears of an Ottoman-style Sunni state, it was this hope that moved Shi'is to oppose Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, the late Sunni Ba'athists, and 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif during the 1950s and 1960s.¹²⁶

While pan-Arabism was mostly divisive, it did have some limited success in reconciling Sunnis and Shi'is. The first attempts at reconciliation occurred in Iran, where Iranian mujtahids began to soften their tone towards Sunnism. The first Iraqi to cross the aisle was the leading Iraqi Shi'i mujtahid, Mohammad Kashif al-Ghita, who exchanged conciliatory letters with Egyptian provisional president Mohammad Nagib in 1958.¹²⁷ This action began a movement towards conciliation within the Sunni clerical establishment that culminated in a fatwa issued by Mahmud Shaltut in Cairo. Shaltut, the rector of al-Azhar University, one of the most important centers of learning in the Sunni world, issued a fatwa recognizing Twelver Shi'ism as a legitimate Islamic school alongside the other four Sunni schools of law.¹²⁸ Shaltut augmented his decree by implementing courses in Shi'i law and religious practices at Al-Azhar. Nasser's victory in 1956 during the Suez Canal crisis may have won more lay Shi'is to his side, but Ghita's exchange reveals that even the religiously devout made overtures towards Sunnis.¹²⁹ In 1960, for example, when Egypt broke off diplomatic relations with Iran after Iran recognized Israel, a dispute broke out among

¹²⁶ Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 85.

¹²⁷ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 121.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹²⁹ Sluglett, Peter, and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "The Historiography of Modern Iraq," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 5 (1991): 1408-1421.

Iraqi Shi'i mujtahids over whom to support.¹³⁰ That the solidarity of the usually tight-knit Shi'i ulama could even be challenged is evidence that pan-Arabism made inroads into these communities.

The success of pan-Arabism in Iraq reveals the degree to which Shi'i identity was influenced by external political events. The first international issue was the conflict in Palestine, which caused a surge in nationalist and pro-Arab feelings. In 1928, Alfred Mond, a prominent British Zionist, visited Iraq and was greeted by a massive demonstration in support of Palestinian territorial rights.¹³¹ The impact on the intellectual movement was profound. The Palestine question connected the Arab intellectual movement to an observable example of British and French colonial dominance over the Middle East.¹³² Sati al-Husri and Michel Aflaq would not have been nearly as influential if their concerns did not transcend their respective national borders, and each successive conflict – Palestine, Libya, Algeria, and even Iran – only did more to reinforce the negative opinion of the European powers. Grievances about the Iraqi government later became mixed with grievances about international politics. The Iraqi intifadah (or upheaval) in 1948, for example, was ostensibly about the conduct of the Iraqi monarchy but was really inspired by the war in Palestine.¹³³ Muzahim al-Pachachi, the prominent organizer of the Arab nationalist Culture Club in Baghdad, was elected Prime Minister in 1948 but forced to resign because of Iraq's failure in the Arab-Israeli War. Without Palestine and conflicts like it, and without

¹³⁰ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 121-2.

¹³¹ Marr, "The Development of a Nationalist Ideology in Iraq, 1920-1941," 100.

¹³² Abdul-Salam Yousef, "The Struggle for Cultural Hegemony during the Iraqi Revolution," in *Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, ed. Robert Fernea and William Roger Louis (London, New York: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 1991), 180.

¹³³ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 131.

Arab leaders who proclaimed the issue of pan-Arabism, Iraqi particularism would have had a far wider appeal.¹³⁴

Ideological Currents: Communism

Communism was the first ideological movement in Iraq that attracted large numbers of Shi'is. The growing political frustrations of a younger generation of Shi'is were voiced through their adherence to communism in the 1940s and 1950s. Between 1949 and 1955, Shi'is rose from 21 to 47 percent of the Iraqi Communist Party and eventually became a majority.¹³⁵ The sectarian breakdown is shown by the following tables that show statistics for upper, middle, and lower echelons of the Communist Party:

Table 2.2: Iraqi Communist Party: Religion, Sect, and Ethnic Origin, Higher Echelons: Fahd's Central Committee (1941-1949)¹³⁶

	Number of Members	Percentage
Shi'i Arabs	6	21.4%
Sunni Arabs	9	32.2%

Table 2.3: Iraqi Communist Party: Religion, Sect, and Ethnic Origin, Middle Echelons (1943-June 1949)

	Number of Members	Percentage
Shi'i Arabs	96	36.6%
Sunni Arabs	47	17.9%

¹³⁴ Sluglett, Peter and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "Divide and Rule in British-controlled Iraq," 143.

¹³⁵ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 132.

¹³⁶ "Fahd" refers to Comrade Fahd, of Yusuf Salman Yusuf, the Christian leader of the Communist Party from 1941 until his death in 1949.

Table 2.4: Iraqi Communist Party: Religion, Sect, and Ethnic Origin, Lower Echelons and “Active” Rank and File (1947-June 1949)¹³⁷

	Number of Members	Percentage
Shi’i Arabs	254	33.6%
Sunni Arabs	175	23.1%

As Hanna Batatu argues, the Shi’i role in the Communist Party has occasionally been overstated. While Sunnis were the clear minority in the party, they were well represented in higher echelons of party power, a mirror of their position in Iraqi society.¹³⁸ In lower levels, Sunni participation dropped and Shi’is formed the majority of the Party.¹³⁹ It is useful to compare these tables to the ethnic makeup of Iraq at the time:

Table 2.5: Estimated Percentage of Ethnicity in 1947

	Urban Population of Provinces	Urban Population of Greater Baghdad	Total Urban Population of Iraq
Shi’i Arabs	44.7%	35.8%	41.9%
Sunni Arabs	23.2%	33.9%	26.7%
Kurds	15.8%	3.5%	11.8%

Communism became a factor in the public and social life of Iraq in the 1940s. Public uprisings like Al-Wathbah in January 1948 or the Intifadah in November 1952 drove more Shi’is to communism.¹⁴⁰ On the eve of the Revolution of 1958, a local Special

¹³⁷ The tables can be found in Batatu’s appendix. They are tables A-27, A-28, and A-29 respectively. The table on ethnicity in Iraq generally can be found in each one of these tables as well. Although these numbers might appear small, they only address the number of active members. The total number of “Communists” was much greater.

¹³⁸ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 649.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 650.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 666.

Branch officer remarked, "Communism... has penetrated... all classes."¹⁴¹ This rapid success of communism among Shi'is can be explained by two primary factors, demographics and ideology.

Communism was the chief beneficiary of the growing movement of poor Shi'is into urban areas. Most of these peasants settled in neighborhoods of Baghdad like al-Thawra, an almost exclusively Shi'i slum.¹⁴² Cut off from traditional support and religious structures, these pilgrims were ripe for communism's message.¹⁴³ Even in rural areas where old religious networks were stronger, communism made headway precisely because those religious networks appeared ill-equipped to address the economic problems of modernization. Shi'i workers, members of the lower-middle-class intelligentsia, and students all flocked to communism, the latter to the "Cultural Committees" that were set up in 1944-1945 at various colleges.¹⁴⁴ These Committees became hotbeds for the promulgation of Marxist theory to students, who were well-educated, poor, and unemployed.

Communist ideology was the perfect fit for the growing demographic of uprooted and unsettled Shi'i peasants. In part this was due to the loss of power among other groups. The loss of power by both the rural landowners and the Shi'i merchant class left Shi'is with few outlets for political protest.¹⁴⁵ The prominent Shi'i Abu al-Timman attracted many Shi'is with his non-sectarian National Party in the early 1930s, but his removal from government left many Shi'is and socialists with

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 756.

¹⁴² Sami Zubaida, "Community, Class and Minorities in Iraqi Politics," 205.

¹⁴³ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 129.

¹⁴⁴ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 615.

¹⁴⁵ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 66-67.

no forum for their cause.¹⁴⁶ Communism thrived because it exploited this political vacuum, but it was not simply the lack of alternative ideologies that led to communism's success. By stressing conflict against existing authority, communism accorded "with a sentiment by which Iraqis are animated and which reaches very deep."¹⁴⁷ This was particularly true for Shi'is, whose identification with the history of being a minority in the Middle East predisposed them to embrace a doctrine that calls for a dynamic change in power. Martyrdom, another key attribute of Shi'i ritual, was expressed through the Communist Party because of its resistance to the government; when Fahd was hanged publicly in 1949, the Party was quick to publicize the martyrdom of its fallen victims. But communism's secular outlook, despite being consistently downplayed, prevented it from making inroads with Shi'is on religious grounds.¹⁴⁸ More important to Shi'is was the stress of communism on economic and political equality.¹⁴⁹ Shi'is had always been poorer than Sunnis, but the close proximity of recent Shi'i migrants to rich Sunnis in Baghdad highlighted the difference between the two. Shi'is were not attracted to communism because they were Shi'is, but because they were poor.

The last element that contributed to the success of communism in Iraq was the party's cohesiveness, organizational skill, and ability to weather political crises. As Rashid 'Ali's 1941 movement demonstrates, pan-Arabs had been gaining power until the British invasion halted their momentum. Their press was shut down, they were excluded from the army, and almost three hundred of them were taken to

¹⁴⁶ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 430.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 469.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 410.

¹⁴⁹ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 133.

concentration camps at Fao, Amarah, and Nuqrat al-Salman.¹⁵⁰ The regent ‘Abdullah and Nuri al-Said’s frequent repression created a very unpredictable political situation that was difficult to navigate. While the pan-Arabs handled this period poorly, the Communist Party thrived. Close connections to Moscow gave them a highly organized party that was continuous and ordered. Their underground enjoyed a near monopoly in the publication of political philosophy.¹⁵¹ And their ideology, focused on secrecy and historical importance, was well-suited for the hard times in which they were forced to operate.

Although they clashed in the 1950s, pan-Arabism influenced communism as well. Many early communists had a distinct pan-Arab orientation that was at loggerheads with the universalism of Soviet doctrine. This trend only increased over time as Palestine, the Suez Canal, and Algeria became topics for public debate. The War in Palestine is a great example of the importance of pan-Arab issues to communists. At the outbreak of the war, the U.S.S.R. initially supported the Israelis, causing a crisis within the Iraqi Communist Party. The Party released a statement that broke from the official line, stating that, “it is not admissible that we should derive our position on national issues from that of the Soviet Union.”¹⁵² The U.S.S.R. later reversed its position (partially in response to a series of letters written by the ICP), but the episode reveals the inescapable impact of pan-Arabism. The Communist Party could not weather the effects of taking a pro-Israeli stance and was forced to break from its ideological patron. For the ICP, the adoption of pan-Arab

¹⁵⁰ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 478.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 481.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 602.

doctrine was largely a political necessity. There was a movement, however, that combined elements of pan-Arabism and communism for ideological reasons; that movement was the Ba'ath Party.

The Ba'ath Party will be discussed in more detail later, but its ideology deserves mention here because of its proximity to both pan-Arabism and communism. Founded by Michel Aflaq in the early 1940s, Ba'athism was like a "mystical Marxism" tailored to the Arab World. It spoke of the "eternal destiny" of Arabs and divided history into Marxist-like eras, predicting that the party would usher in an era of Arab dominance.¹⁵³ The Iraqi branch of the Ba'ath party was led by a young Shi'i engineer, Fu'ad al-Rikabi, and the party enjoyed substantial Shi'i support in its early years. Unlike communism, the Ba'ath Party was not atheistic, and unlike the pan-Arab movement, it was vaguely socialist.¹⁵⁴ This concentration on the inequalities of landownership appealed to the younger generation of Shi'is as well as Sunni nationalists, but the lack of organization prevented the Ba'ath from becoming as entrenched as the communists in the 1950s. Their emergence in Iraq and their appeal are a testament to the prevalence of these two doctrines.

Shi'is in Political Power: Salih Jabr, Mohammed al-Sadr, and Fadhil al-Jamali

As noted earlier, there were four Shi'i Prime Ministers in the period from 1941 to 1958, although the short term of 'Abd al-Wahhab Mirjan (three months) will

¹⁵³ Ibid., 737.

¹⁵⁴ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 143.

not be considered here. After the “Second British occupation” in 1941, the government dominated by Nuri al-Said was ripe for Shi’i Prime Ministers personally nurtured and monitored by Said. For the most part, Jabr, al-Sadr, and al-Jamali were stifled in their attempts to pass any meaningful reforms, but their experiences demonstrate the uneasiness with which Sunnis greeted Shi’is in power. Simply being Shi’i was never enough to topple a Prime Minister, but religious prejudices were voiced when other concerns emerged. The growing chasm between Shi’i Prime Ministers and the Shi’i masses also shows the divide between the effendiyya and the peasants and the general lack of sectarian loyalty to Baghdad politicians among Shi’is. Although Shi’is occupied the position of Prime Minister for the first time, the true expression of Shi’i identity occurred among the communists rather than in the Iraqi government.

Salih Jabr became first Shi’i Prime Minister in March 1947. Jabr had been the first Shi’i Minister of Interior in 1941, and the British had once entertained hopes of him replacing Nuri al-Said. Jabr was chosen as Prime Minister primarily to deal with the revising the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, an extremely unpopular agreement that guaranteed the British a strong hand in Iraqi affairs.¹⁵⁵ Jabr was careful not to broadcast his Shi’ism too loudly, but he did appoint Shi’is as the Ministers of the Interior, Finance, and Economics. The reception of Jabr was mixed and divided along sectarian lines. Many Shi’is saw his appointment as the beginning of a new era; many Sunnis feared that Jabr’s appointment was likely to lead to an increase in

¹⁵⁵ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 348.

Shi'i power.¹⁵⁶ As one of the first Prime Ministers with discernible reformist tendencies, Jabr also garnered initial support from many younger Iraqis, both Shi'i and Sunni, who hoped that he would introduce some of the much-needed social reforms that Nuri had neglected.

Their optimism did not last long. Upon his appointment as Prime Minister, Jabr fanned nationalist flames by focusing on the Palestine question as an attempt to distract the effendiyya and the poor from the unequal economic situation.¹⁵⁷ This nationalist tension nurtured by Jabr backfired in the form of massive demonstrations when he negotiated of the Portsmouth Treaty, which promised to continue many of Britain's unpopular privileges in Iraq. Jabr signed the treaty on January 15, 1948, and by January 22 riots had broken out in Baghdad. When Jabr responded by sending the police in to attack the demonstrators, the riots became violent and hundreds were killed or injured.¹⁵⁸ The police had to withdraw from the scene and Jabr resigned immediately, fleeing that evening to the Euphrates and later to England. The elite, who had received the idea of a Shi'i Prime Minister with suspicion, did nothing to cushion his fall.

Sectarian insults against Jabr were increasingly vocalized as anti-government demonstrations broke out. Protesters questioned his loyalty to the Iraqi state and denounced him as a servant of Great Britain, continuing the growing trend of

¹⁵⁶ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 128-129.

¹⁵⁷ Eppel, Michael, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 241.

¹⁵⁸ Sluglett, Peter and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "The Social Classes and the Origins of the Iraqi Revolution" in *Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, ed. Fernea, Robert A., and William Roger Louis (London, New York: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 1991), 122.

conflating Shi'ism with foreign influences.¹⁵⁹ At this point, Shi'ism was not strongly identified with any major outside power (as it would be later), but being Shi'i and being proudly nationalistic were seemingly opposed. Even Shi'i pride in Jabr was muted, as Jabr's premiership was indistinguishable from the Sunnis who preceded him. The political demands of Shi'i groups had little to do with sectarianism: Jabr "meant nothing to the workers without bread, the lawyers without lawsuits, the forgotten clerks, the students clandestinely propagandized, and the parties held in leash."¹⁶⁰ In fact, some historians have alleged that Jabr's downfall contributed to the rise of communism in the 1950s, as the hopes of a new era of Shi'i Iraqis were dashed over the course of ten months.¹⁶¹

Jabr's later career will be discussed shortly, but it is important to note that another Shi'i, Mohammed al-Sadr, was appointed directly after him. Al-Sadr was a Shi'i sayyid, well-connected to religious authority and one of the leaders of the 1920 uprising.¹⁶² Al-Sadr's appointment was overtly sectarian and revealed the regent's sensitivity to the sectarian concerns of the demonstrators.¹⁶³ It was also a response to Shi'i tribal shaikhs, who threatened to bring their tribes into Baghdad in order to quash the riots of 1948. The tribal shaikhs were happy with the appointment of one of their own. Likewise, the Baghdad effendiyya admired al-Sadr for his participation in the Revolt of 1920, but they quickly lost respect for him when war broke out in Palestine during the same year. Ironically, al-Sadr was responsible for the Iraqi

¹⁵⁹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 121.

¹⁶⁰ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 546-7.

¹⁶¹ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 133.

¹⁶² Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 557.

¹⁶³ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 121.

invasion of Israel in May, but his domestic cooperation with the British tainted his nationalist credentials.¹⁶⁴ He presided, in the end, over a caretaker government meant more to placate sectarian fears than to actually govern.¹⁶⁵

After Salih Jabr's political career was interrupted with his resignation in 1948, he became bolder and cut ties with Nuri al-Said's coterie of Sunni politicians. During Tawfiq al-Suwaidi's premiership in 1950, Jabr became Minister of Interior, where he was suspected of biasing corruption charges against Sunnis and showing sectarian favoritism in appointments and promotions. These accusations may have been true, but it is notable that they only surfaced when the Minister of Interior was Shi'i, displaying a kind of "sectarian solidarity" among the Sunni political elite.¹⁶⁶ Facing criticism, Jabr broke with Nuri and formed the Socialist People's Party (Hizb al-Umma al-Ishtiraki), which made religious overtures in order to gain support from the younger intelligentsia and the urban Shi'i.¹⁶⁷ Jabr and Nuri's denial of any loyalty to their religious identities did not stop their fight from taking on sectarian tones. Nuri did not hesitate to stoke the fears of the Sunni elite to win their support against Jabr, and Jabr exploited Shi'i feelings of discrimination and frustration to advance his own cause.¹⁶⁸ When Jabr criticized the government and galvanized street demonstrations in November 1952, the Regent and Nuri called in the army to repress the demonstrations, form a provisional government, and rig the elections in January

¹⁶⁴ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 244.

¹⁶⁵ Sluglett, Peter, and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "The Social Classes and the Origins of the Iraqi Revolution," 127.

¹⁶⁶ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 128.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁶⁸ Eppel, "The Elite, the Effendiyya, and the Growth of Nationalism and Pan-Arabism in Hashemite Iraq, 1921-1958," 421.

1953.¹⁶⁹ Jabr was not included in any of the governments formed following the elections of 1953. Yitzhak Nakash writes:

The Regent was unwilling to allow a Shi'i leader to emerge as an alternative to Sa'id... the results of the elections frustrated those young educated Shi'is who had looked to Jabir for leadership and were disappointed by his failure to realize their socioeconomic and political aspirations.

The Sunni elite's ability to call on the army to back up their power was a privilege that the Shi'i did not have, and it functioned as a stop-gap fix to the perceived Shi'i threat. Jabr's death in 1957 was a sadly poetic ending to his declining political career: he collapsed dead from a heart attack while criticizing Nuri al-Said in a speech in the senate.¹⁷⁰

The other prominent Shi'i Prime Minister in the late monarchic era was Fadhil al-Jamali. Jamali's tenure at the Ministry of Education, while impressive, did not make him an obvious candidate for Prime Minister because his intellectualism, Shi'ism, and pan-Arabism were seen as possible liabilities.¹⁷¹ He was appointed anyway in September 1953 and was greeted, like Jabr six earlier, with a warm reception from many Shi'is who were unsatisfied with continuing Sunni dominance. This dissatisfaction was well-known and accommodated by many Sunni politicians. Concerned about support for Salih Jabr's Socialist People's Party, Nuri al-Said chose

¹⁶⁹ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 131.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁷¹ Eppel, Michael, "The Fadhil Al-Jamali Government in Iraq, 1953-54," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 3 (1999), 423.

to support Jamali's government because he was worried about the "rising tide of grievances among the urban-educated Shi'a."¹⁷²

Jamali's selection of his cabinet was surprisingly similar to his policies as Minister of Education. As Minister of Education, Jamali had expanded schools into uneducated Shi'i areas but preserved the pan-Arab canon of the textbooks.¹⁷³ As Prime Minister, he dramatically increased the number of Shi'i ministers but kept a pan-Arab foreign policy. Of the Jamali government's sixteen ministers, eight were Shi'i, including the influential Minister of Finance, Abd al-Karim al-Uzri.¹⁷⁴ Jamali's appointments were met with consternation from Sunnis, who suspected sectarian favoritism and nepotism at their expense.¹⁷⁵ This was by far the highest number and proportion of both Shi'i and non-Sunnis that had ever been included in an Iraqi government, but no formal acts of opposition were taken to remove Jamali from power.¹⁷⁶ Ironically, the fearful Sunni elite were eventually reassured by Jamali's policies, which reflected his undying pan-Arabism.¹⁷⁷ In fact, his pan-Arab stance made him unpopular among the young effendiyya, both Sunni and Shi'i, who had hoped for a more reformist Prime Minister. Yet when Jabr tried to ambitiously redistribute rural land, he was brought face to face with the Shi'i tribal shaikhs, who still wielded enough power to facilitate his departure from government. Jamali was forced to back down from his reforms when they were greeted with protests and threats to renew Sunni-Shi'i tension in the countryside. This left Jamali politically

¹⁷² Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 134.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁷⁴ Eppel, "The Fadhil Al-Jamali Government in Iraq, 1953-54," 426.

¹⁷⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 135.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁷⁷ Eppel, "The Fadhil Al-Jamali Government in Iraq, 1953-54," 425.

vulnerable and weak; the final straw that led to his resignation was the parliament's rejection of his attempt to fund pan-Arab activity within Syria engineered by Nuri al-Said.

The Shi'i tribal shaikhs' political blackmail of Jamali is important in several regards. As Michael Eppel writes, "despite the anti-Sunnite resentment characteristic of the Shi'ite tribal notables and landowners, the concrete economic interest in preserving the status quo was more important to them than the identification with the Shi'ites in the government."¹⁷⁸ Sectarian identification was of secondary importance to the shaikhs, the urban Shi'i poor, and the mujtahids. They were all pleased to see a Shi'i Prime Minister, but they did not identify strongly with those in power and never abandoned their regional or professional loyalties. While the Shi'i lower class perceived Jabr and Jamali as too conservative and too Sunni for their interests, the conservative elite did not like what a Shi'i Prime Minister represented and were more than happy to do away with both Jabr and Jamali. Shi'i politicians were caught between two groups they could not please, and a step towards one group inevitably led to complaints from the other.

The Revolution of 1958 and its Aftermath

The Revolution of 1958 was a momentous event in the history of Iraq and the Middle East. Whereas Iraq had always been the passive recipient of Syrian-born and Palestinian-driven ideology, it now took an active role in shaping political currents in

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 426.

the region. Egypt, Syria, Iran and the U.S.S.R. watched as particularism clashed with pan-Arabism and Iraq became the lead actor on the Middle Eastern political stage.¹⁷⁹ Under the British Mandate it was hard for international relations to fundamentally influence Shi'i identity because strict foreign control caused most Iraqis to focus inwardly on domestic politics. Since 1941, however, Iraq had been slowly awakening to the world around it, and this process reached its peak in 1958. The Suez Crisis, the Baghdad Pact, the Revolution of 1958, the United Arab Republic – all were part of a political argument over the country, ideology, and leaders that should have control over the Middle East.

While the interplay between international politics and the Revolution of 1958 is well documented, the role of sectarian relations is not. Pan-Arabism and communism were the ideologies of Sunnis and Shi'is respectively; neither was followed by either sect exclusively, but they vaguely constituted a proxy war that fell on roughly religious lines. Just as sectarian tensions boiled to the top in clashes between Nuri al-Said and Salih Jabr, they also arose under the stress of the Revolution. In the end, both philosophies (but not both sects) would lose, but it took over a decade for this to occur. The gradual development of a new Iraq and the slow death of communism and pan-Arabism hide the fact that the Revolution is also noteworthy for the era it began. The Revolution saw the monarchy crumble after thirty-seven years of rule and ushered in a new, "republican" era. However stifling the monarchy was to Shi'is who sought greater political inclusion, the Revolution

¹⁷⁹ Stork, Joe, "The Soviet Union, the Great Powers and Iraq," in *Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, ed. Fernea, Robert A., and William Roger Louis (London, New York: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 1991), 99.

ended a period of moderate sectarian rapprochement and Shi'i advancement. The new era would be less kind to Shi'is.

The political climate of the Middle East was conducive to a revolution in the late 1950s. The monarchy in Egypt had been overthrown in 1952, the Suez Crisis had occurred in 1956, and Syria had experienced a coup in 1954. As a result, a feeling of anxiousness descended upon Baghdad in the years leading up to 1958. Sir John Troutbeck, the British head of the Middle East Office in Cairo, wrote:

Bagdadi lawyers and coffee-house politicians... seem to regard it as almost a matter of honour to have a *coup d'état*. It has happened in Egypt and Syria, and even in the despised Lebanon. The Bagdadis are hanging their heads in shame; they have not yet even murdered a Prime Minister.¹⁸⁰

This, of course, would change. On July 14th, 1958, heads of the "Free Officers" movement 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif directed an elaborately planned coup d'état. A mass movement of people filled the streets after the Free Officers took Baghdad. An estimated 100,000 people violently vented their frustrations with the old regime by executing the young King Faisal II and the Regent Abdullah in the gardens of the palace.¹⁸¹ Nuri al-Said escaped on the day of the Revolution only to be caught the following day trying to sneak out of the capital in women's clothing.

The immediate escalation of tensions occurred when Iraq signed the Baghdad Pact in 1955 with Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, none of them Arab

¹⁸⁰ Louis, *Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, 35.

¹⁸¹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 805.

nations. The Baghdad Pact was a defensive military pact intended as a rebuttal against Gamal Abd al-Nasser's fiery pan-Arab rhetoric. In his crowning achievement, Nasser exuberantly defied the major Western powers in the Suez Crisis of 1956. It bought him public admiration, international political capital, and the unofficial title of spokesman for all Arabs.¹⁸² Nasser's words put the "old gang" of Iraq in a difficult position.¹⁸³ Dependent on the British-backed monarchy for their survival, they were wedded to the independent Iraqi state and forced to comply with the Baghdad Pact, which was received with almost universal scorn.¹⁸⁴ Even Shi'is, who did not support a union with Egypt, found fault with a defensive pact whose members included Great Britain and several peripheral (non-Arab) states.

Meanwhile, in the army, Nasser's doctrine was reaching an appreciative audience struck by a newfound confidence.¹⁸⁵ In response to the Baghdad Pact, Nasser launched a media campaign against the Iraqi government and quickened his drive for an Arab state that resulted in the establishment of the United Arab Republic with Syria in February 1958. Taking Nasser's example in the Suez and Iran's defiance of the oil companies in the early 1950s, many army officers felt for the first time that the government's imperialist allies were not invincible.¹⁸⁶ In fact, the Supreme Committee of the Free Officers was so motivated by international politics

¹⁸² Ibid., 776.

¹⁸³ Sluglett, Peter, and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "The Social Classes and the Origins of the Iraqi Revolution," 130.

¹⁸⁴ Daniel, Norman, "Contemporary Perceptions of the Revolution in Iraq on 14 July 1958," in *Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, ed. Fernea, Robert A., and William Roger Louis (London, New York: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 1991), 4.

¹⁸⁵ Sluglett, Peter, and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, "The Social Classes and the Origins of the Iraqi Revolution," 130.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 139.

that they sent representatives to Egypt to gauge the possible reception of a new regime. When both Nasser and the Soviet ambassador in Cairo confirmed that they would back the revolution, the Officers felt confident enough to carry it out.¹⁸⁷ The international element of the Revolution was apparent when the first signs to appear on the streets of Baghdad contained pictures of Gamal Abd al-Nasser rather than the Iraqi Free Officers.¹⁸⁸ It took another day or two before they were replaced with Abd al-Qasim.

The growing divide between communists and pan-Arabs damaged Sunni-Shi'i relations. As discussed earlier, the state's massive integrative processes in the previous two decades did not heal the massive divergence of economic, social, and political interests among Shi'is.¹⁸⁹ Shi'is had gained numerically in ministerial appointments, but the growing polarization between Sunni-dominated pan-Arab groups and Shi'i dominated communist ones widened the divide between the sects. In 1953, just after Fadhil al-Jamali's short premiership, Sir Troutbeck remarked that "the split between the Sunnis and Shias seemed to be getting wider rather than otherwise."¹⁹⁰ The government seems to have been aware of this. The Shi'i festival of Ashoura was abruptly cancelled in 1957 because of fears of a Shi'i uprising.¹⁹¹ Nuri al-Said, who took over the premiership for the fourteenth time in March 1958, set up his most ethnically diverse cabinet yet by including a good balance of Sunnis

¹⁸⁷ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 795.

¹⁸⁸ Daniel, "Contemporary Perceptions of the Revolution in Iraq on 14 July 1958," 13.

¹⁸⁹ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 66.

¹⁹⁰ Daniel, "Contemporary Perceptions of the Revolution in Iraq on 14 July 1958," 37.

¹⁹¹ Fernea, Robert A., *Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, 150.

and Shi'is.¹⁹² The international paradigm influenced sectarian relations and Shi'i identity in a secondary way. As Nasser and the monarchy clashed, so did pan-Arabs and communists. And as these two parties clashed, so did large numbers of Sunnis and Shi'is.

Regardless of the rift growing between Sunnis and Shi'is, neither sect supported the old regime.¹⁹³ The Communist Party's "wait-and-see" approach characterized Shi'i skepticism of both the old regime and the Free Officers. Among the Free Officers, only two were Shi'i, and the Commanders Council was almost exclusively Sunni. This understandably worried many Shi'is, but their frustration with the old regime was such that they did not rise to defend it. This was a stroke of political luck for the communists, who quickly realized that not all Free Officers were Nasserites.¹⁹⁴ While 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif supported Arab Unity and the United Arab Republic, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim did not. The Communist Party, cognizant of the chance they might be given in a new regime, did not oppose the revolution and instead endeared themselves to Qasim, who was looking for an ally against the pan-Arabs.

Qasim's defeat of 'Arif was a decisive defeat for the pan-Arabs. When 'Arif made a series of provincial tours to arouse peasant support for unity with Syria and Egypt, Qasim dismissed him from his position as assistant commander in chief and exiled him to Germany. When 'Arif returned secretly to Baghdad in October, he was

¹⁹² Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 145.

¹⁹³ Daniel, "Contemporary Perceptions of the Revolution in Iraq on 14 July 1958," 13.

¹⁹⁴ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 784.

arrested and sentenced to death (later commuted to life imprisonment).¹⁹⁵ Qasim found the Iraqi Communist Party to be a useful ally in resisting the pressure from Ba'athists and Nasserites to join the United Arab Republic.¹⁹⁶ In this he used the same tactic that Sunni parties had used since the 1930s, pandering to Shi'is for political support against a common Sunni enemy. Unlike them, however, Qasim followed through on some of his promises. As a half-Sunni and half-Shi'i, half-Arab and half-Kurd, he was uniquely able to present himself as the representative of all groups in Iraq. And while his land reforms were not as comprehensive as they seemed, they pleased the communists who helped him stay in power.¹⁹⁷

Qasim's defeat of the pan-Arabs concluded with his response to two coup attempts against him by disgruntled Free Officers. The first was led by Rashid 'Ali, who contacted restless pan-Arab Free Officers and tribal shaikhs who opposed Qasim's proposed land reforms in order to plot a coup d'état. The plot was discovered in December 1958 and Rashid 'Ali was arrested, tried and sentenced to death (a term also commuted to life imprisonment). With this event, coupled with the arrest of 'Arif, the rift between Qasim and the pan-Arabs was now clear.¹⁹⁸ A second coup attempt made the divide even more complete. A massive rally in March 1959 triggered a coup attempt by the Free Officers commanding the Mosul Garrison and

¹⁹⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 153.

¹⁹⁶ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 135.

¹⁹⁷ Haj, Samira, *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963: Capital, Power, and Ideology (Suny Series in the Social and Economic History of the Middle East)* (Albany, New York: State University Of New York Press, 1997), 121-5.

¹⁹⁸ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 156.

quickly devolved into an ethnic, intertribal, and socioeconomic conflict.¹⁹⁹ It took the government five days to subdue the violence and gave Qasim the pretext he needed to purge his administration of pan-Arabs. He targeted officers and officials in the military and the civil administration and appointed his own protégés and communists in their stead. The conflict between communists and pan-Arabs, at least for the time being, was over. The pan-Arab trend had “met with a clear but indecisive defeat.”²⁰⁰

It took communism several more years to die. In order to purge his administration of pan-Arab sympathizers, Qasim needed the help of the communists, who he kept content with his land reforms and republican attitude. But the communists were alone in their support of Qasim. Qasim uniquely blended autocracy with reformism, which made the enemy of nearly everyone: conservatives, the effendiyya, the shaikhs, and the remaining pan-Arabs in the army. The access of the communists to Qasim is possibly the high water mark of Shi’i influence in the Iraqi government. It too would be toppled by a Sunni force, but not before holding power and passing important land reforms. A familiar coalition of conservative and pan-Arab forces finally toppled the government in February 1963. They executed Qasim and purged his communist supporters from the government in a particularly brutal fashion.²⁰¹ ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif, who had been ousted, arrested, convicted, sentenced to life in prison, and eventually exiled, returned to become the ringleader of the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 156. Please note that because Mosul’s Shi’i population was (and has always been) very small, the conflict was fought between Kurds and Arabs, Christians and Muslims, and various clans against each other. There was very little Sunni-Shi’i strife.

²⁰⁰ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 831.

²⁰¹ Yousef, “The Struggle for Cultural Hegemony during the Iraqi Revolution,” 1991.

group.²⁰² It was ‘Arif, along with his Ba’athist Vice-President Ahman Hasan al-Bakr, who removed communism from Iraq’s political scene.

‘Arif’s defeat of the communists and his harsh policies towards Shi’is demonstrate the degree to which the Communist Party was synonymous with political Shi’ism. His early refusal to nominate Shi’is for military scholarships and his intransigence in negotiations with the Shi’i merchants exacerbated the feeling that his Sunni-dominated government sought to punish Shi’is for communism’s success under Qasim.²⁰³ In 1964, ‘Arif passed a law stating that those who held Ottoman nationality before 1924 were “indigenous” Iraqis, excluding many Shi’is who had opted out of Ottoman citizenship for tax purposes.²⁰⁴ Questioning Shi’i loyalty to the Iraqi state was employed rhetorically as well. ‘Arif frequently spoke of “Shu’ubiya,” a disgraceful moniker for Shi’is, and one of his ministers wrote a book alleging that Shi’is were loyal to Iran rather than Iraq.²⁰⁵ While it is clear that ‘Arif himself had a narrow sectarian outlook, it is also true that the desire to cleanse the government of communist influences was conflated with the urge to chastise and insult Shi’is. With the death of communism came the death of Shi’i involvement in political life and the reinstatement of Sunni hegemony.²⁰⁶

With the death of ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif, however, came a weak regime susceptible to a Ba’athist coup d’état. When ‘Arif died in an accidental helicopter crash in April 1966, his brother, ‘Abd al-Rahman, took over because of the systematic

²⁰² Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 171.

²⁰³ Jabar, *The Shi’ite Movement in Iraq*, 131.

²⁰⁴ Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 86.

²⁰⁵ Jabar, *The Shi’ite Movement in Iraq*, 133.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

patronage that surrounded ‘Abd al-Salam.²⁰⁷ ‘Abd al-Salam had always kept the Nasserites and the Ba’athists at bay, appealing to pan-Arabism to win their support but ultimately following an Iraq-first policy.²⁰⁸ ‘Abd al-Rahman was much less adept than his brother and he mistakenly pandered to pan-Arab army officers by releasing a number of Ba’athists from prison.²⁰⁹ This brought more discriminatory policies against Shi’is, but it also brought an unforeseen threat against ‘Arif’s rule. After marches occurred in Baghdad following the June 1967 war in Israel, Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party denounced the “communist threat” and the government itself. On July 17th, three key military officers, in conjunction with the Ba’ath party, seized several government buildings and exiled President ‘Arif.²¹⁰ After July 30th Iraq would be ruled by a small council of Ba’athist generals, all of whom were Sunni, and most of whom were from the town of Tikrit.²¹¹ The Ba’athists had returned to power and any share of authority that Shi’is had obtained was long forgotten.

Conclusion

In many ways, Shi’i identity was born in the period from 1941 to 1968. The Shi’i community had been fragmented under the British Mandate – and it remained divided in many ways – but Shi’is gathered en masse for the first time in the 1950s. New demographic changes brought Shi’is to the cities, previous education policies

²⁰⁷ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 185.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 190.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

²¹¹ Baram, Amazia, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 21 Vol. 4 (1989): 450.

produced a new class of Shi'i intellectuals, and four Shi'is became Prime Ministers. Courting the Shi'i masses had always been a political tool in the hands of Sunni opposition groups, but it became a real threat when Salih Jabr's party began actively courting Shi'is, and it became even more of a threat as the Shi'i-dominated Communist Party influenced Iraqi politics. Ultimately, of course, Shi'is never did "take" power, but they reached a high point in their political participation and share of government ministers. Not only had this not been seen before, but it would not be seen again until after Saddam Hussein's twenty-three year dictatorship.

It is a bit misleading to point to the Shi'i share of ministerial positions as a benchmark for Shi'i progress. That the Shi'is began to form a more cohesive community in the 1950s is not attributable to their increased representation. Most Shi'is never felt a strong connection to their coreligionists in the government, and their expression of identity through the communist movement occurred in spite of apparent political successes rather than because of them. This point might seem to betray the argument that Shi'i identity was expressed more cohesively during this time. But politically powerful Shi'i groups – the tribal shaikhs and some members of the emerging effendiyya – were numerically small and disconnected from the urban masses of migrant Shi'is. It was among these masses that communism took root, and it was among these masses that a distinct Shi'i identity was first expressed. Because they were cut off from tribal structures and traditional religious networks, there was something deeply ironic about Shi'i communism; for the first cohesive expression of Shi'i identity, it was expressedly non-religious.

A large part of Shi'i political identity was determined by international political paradigms. Britain never allowed Iraq to play a large role internationally, and as a consequence, a vague anticolonialism characterized Shi'i identity throughout the 1920s. This changed in the 1950s, when the British eased their control of Iraq and pan-Arabism became popular across the Middle East. For Sunnis, Nasser's diplomatic grandstanding produced support for anticolonialism and a unified Arab state. Among Iraqi Shi'is, pan-Arabism prompted the opposite reaction because of fear that the unutilized Shi'i numerical majority would be eliminated in such a state. As a result, Shi'is fought for neither side. They did not support the British, but they did not support Arab unity either. Any shred of ethnic Arab identification that had existed in 1920 was gone, and the ideological gap between Sunnis and Shi'is was growing.

International political paradigms also influenced the way in which Shi'is expressed their identity. One effect of less British control was that foreign policy decisions were increasingly independent of foreign control. Along with this increased proximity to power came an increase in political participation. Where Shi'is had previously relied on local religious networks as their primary mode for self-identification, they now turned to political parties. At first, the sectarian makeup of major political parties was well-distributed, but each party became increasingly homogeneous as tensions flared. If one accepts the argument that the foreign policy proposals of the pan-Arabs drove many Shi'is away from it, this suggests a kind of "trickle-down" identification. International politics shaped political parties, and

political parties influenced sectarian identity. International paradigms affected Shi'i identity in a secondary way.

Although some scholars assert that party affiliation was the result of socioeconomic trends rather than religious ones, it is hard to ignore the polarization between Sunnis and Shi'is. Granted, Shi'is were overwhelmingly poorer than Sunnis, and part of communism's appeal lay in its doctrine of economic equality and social justice. In fact, the fears of Shi'i dominance voiced by the Sunni elite suggest that Sunnis were more cognizant of potential Shi'i solidarity and dominance than Shi'is were. Nevertheless, any explanation of party affiliation that disregards sectarianism ignores both the importance of pan-Arabism to Shi'is and the sheer numbers of Shi'i adherents to communism. When the Ba'athists took power in 1963, the only districts of Baghdad that resisted the coup were Shi'i. Not a single Sunni neighborhood stood by the communists and opposed the Ba'athists, regardless of the fact that some of the resistance was Sunni.²¹² This, in addition to the previously discussed makeup of the Communist Party and the Ba'athist leadership, is enough to prove that Shi'i adherence to communism and opposition to pan-Arabism was heavily influenced by religious identity. Strong Shi'i self-expression through the Communist Party made the 1950s the peak of a coherent Shi'i identity.

²¹² Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 983.

CHAPTER
THREE: FROM
1968 TO 1988

Introduction: 1968 to 1988 in Comparison

In the period from 1920 to 1941, Britain prevented Iraq from entering the regional political scene and obstructed the formation of a cohesive Shi'i identity. Most Shi'is were uninvolved in community or political organizations, and any Shi'i identity that did form was an amorphous amalgamation of characteristics generally anti-British in nature. The relative political liberation of Iraq from 1941 to 1968 reversed this trend by opening Iraq to international political ideologies and altering the relations between Shi'is and Sunnis. Previously divided, Shi'is formed a broadly-shared identity because of their increased role in domestic politics and their increased sensitivity to international politics. The Iraqi Communist Party was the nexus of Shi'i identity formation, replacing previous tribal and religious sources of identification. International politics became a part of domestic politics, and, in turn, domestic politics became a part of Shi'i identity.

If the era before World War II was one of restriction and the era after it was one of liberation, the period from 1968 to 1988 was a complicated mix between the two. In some ways, the reign of the Ba'athists was a return to the dictatorial days of the British. Like the British, the regime offered limited opportunities for participation without threatening the power of the Sunni government. Opposition parties, Shi'i or otherwise, were not tolerated. Unlike the British, however, the Ba'athists had more tools at their disposal. The vast increase in the power of the state allowed the government to monitor society and quash any insubordination in new and

unprecedented ways. The totalitarian nature of Ba'athist rule was enough to eliminate potential threats to power, but it was not enough to keep regional ideologies from influencing Shi'i identity (to the chagrin of the Ba'athists). Like communism in the 1950s, Islamism became popular among Shi'is and widened the gap between them and Iraqi Sunnis.

The events that highlighted the period and tested the nature of Shi'i identity were the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. After sixty years of restrictive incorporation into the Iraqi state, Shi'is found themselves called upon by the representatives of two aspects of their identity. On one side, Ayatollah Khomeini's Shi'i Islamic state urged Shi'is to rise up against their Sunni oppressors. On the other side, Saddam Hussein stressed the Arab identity of Iraqi Shi'is and cast the war as the continuation of a long historical battle between noble Arabs and sinister Persians. The Shi'i reaction, like the Shi'i reaction to the Revolution of 1958, was ambivalent. Supporting neither Saddam nor Khomeini in full but ultimately loyal to their country, they fought on the side of Iraq and sustained high casualties for their country. Opposition movements that allied with Iran were small in number, and although Saddam continued to oppress religious Shi'i leaders, the war actually saw a significant amount of internal rapprochement between the sects.

Another change that occurred after 1968 was the disappearance of an accessible location for Shi'i identification. During the Revolt of 1920, Shi'is and Sunnis turned to their local mosques as a space for collective action. As the decline of the mujtahids and the slow encroachment of the state on private life diminished the prominence of religion, this changed, but a new location for identity formation

emerged with the rise of communism. Shi'i identification now occurred in much more political terms through the attendance of party meetings and mass rallies. The rise of Islamism brought the return of the mosque as a gathering place for Shi'is, but as the Iran-Iraq War shows, the religious piety of most Shi'is was much less than it had been sixty years earlier. There was no place, organization, or party that spoke to Shi'is exclusively as Shi'is. The effects of this, combined with the effects of a renewed program of cooption by the government, were to fragment the Shi'i community and stifle the development of a separate or complementary identity. Shi'is were Iraqis, but their Shi'ism was effectively questioned, insulted, and conflated with a lack of loyalty.

Ideological Currents: Islamism

Islamism became the dominant ideology among Shi'is after the fall of the monarchy. Like communism and pan-Arabism before it, Islamism came to Iraq from its neighbors. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which was Sunni and staunchly anti-communist, established a branch of the party in Iraq that inspired junior Shi'i clerics with its effective and religiously lawful opposition.²¹³ Although differences existed between Shi'i and Sunni groups, the basic tenets of Islamism were simple. The decline of the Middle East was due to a loss in religious piety that could only be restored with a return to the original tenets of the faith. Islamism shared the anticolonialist streak of Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism, and communism, as some of

²¹³ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 77.

the earliest articles published in Iraqi Islamist newspapers alleged that “the West is held responsible for the deterioration of Islam.”²¹⁴ This similarity demonstrates that one aspect of Shi’i identity, an anticolonial or anti-Western component, remained somewhat constant throughout the twentieth century.²¹⁵ From the Revolt of 1920 to communism to Islamism, Shi’is not only opposed colonial power but used that opposition to define themselves.

The collapse of the Iraqi Communist Party led many Shi’is to join religious parties. Just as the downfall of Abu al-Timman and Salih Jabr created a political vacuum for the communists, so the collapse of the communists produced a void for the Islamists.²¹⁶ The communists’ defeat in 1963 began a process of steady decline that culminated in the exile of 3,000 party members in 1979. The ICP’s strategy of compromise with the Ba’ath regime in the 1970s failed miserably and resulted in widespread disillusionment among party members.²¹⁷ Furthermore, the prominence of regional and filial ties in the upper echelons of the Ba’ath Party inevitably excluded Shi’is and drove them to clandestine groups like al-Da’wah and the Mujahidin.²¹⁸ For some Shi’is, the distance between communism’s non-religiosity and Islamism’s piety was too great. For others, the political void created by the fall of the Communist Party was enough to compel them to join Shi’i Islamist parties.

The rise of Islamism was instigated internally by young Shi’i religious leaders who had witnessed the loss of clerical power to communism, pan-Arabism, and

²¹⁴ Ibid., 118.

²¹⁵ This is not to imply that a similar sentiment did not exist among Sunnis, although a higher degree of skepticism towards the West existed among Shi’is.

²¹⁶ Batatu, Hanna, "Iraq's Underground Shi'i Movements." *Merip Reports* 102 (1982): 4.

²¹⁷ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 136.

²¹⁸ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 132.

Ba'athism. The government had systematically disrupted the power of the Shi'i ulama since 1920, and the demographic changes that uprooted many rural Shi'is destroyed their previously loyal base. Once in the cities, most Shi'is became disconnected from traditional religious networks and drifted towards communism. When uprisings occurred in 1956 because of the Suez Crisis, the Shi'i ulama attempted to quell the violence by issuing a statement that denounced the disturbances, declaring that they were "inconsistent with the commands of religion."²¹⁹ The statement had no effect. For the younger generation of religious leaders, it was clear that the old religious leaders held little sway over their coreligionists. The new group of junior clerics that had been raised in a more secular Iraq understood the need to establish parties in order to compete with non-Islamic ideologies.²²⁰ Communism's muted anti-religiosity, as they understood it, was more attractive to Shi'is than Shi'ism.

The establishment of Shi'i religious parties was a direct response to communism's success among Shi'is. In 1953, the English ambassador to Iraq, Sir John Troutbeck, contacted the chief mujtahid Mohammad al-Husain Kashif al-Ghita to discuss "the common enemy." He emphasized that:

Combating of communism is dependent upon the awakening of the *'ulama* and the spiritual leaders... the warning of the young against these principles that upset the conditions of the world... and their proper guidance in the schools and the clubs.²²¹

²¹⁹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 754.

²²⁰ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 105.

²²¹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 694.

When Shi'is petitioned Qasim for a religious party in 1958, he created al-Hizb al-Islami (the Islamic Party), a joint Sunni-Shi'i Party that sought to reorient political life on religious grounds. Al-Hizb al-Islami appealed to Qasim because of its pronounced hostility to "atheism, materialism, and communism," which he could use as political leverage against the ICP.²²² In fact, atheism soon became a convenient moniker for communism, and publications in Najaf became instrumental in combating the perceived "atheist threat."²²³ The Society of the Ulama of Najaf distributed many of these pamphlets, and a second group of junior ulama established what later became the most prominent Shi'i group, the al-Da'wa Party.²²⁴

Opposed by many conservative ulama and radical in its doctrine, al-Da'wa emulated communism in order to appeal to a large number of Shi'is. The junior ulama of Najaf who formed al-Da'wa understood that communism's popularity was tied to its doctrine and theory of history. They sought to craft a universal Islamic ideology to supplant Marxism accompanied by a tight-knit, politically inspired organization. Like Marxism, Al-Da'wa's doctrine held that there were stages of history: the stage of the "Islamic idea," the political stage, the revolutionary stage, and the phase of an "ideal Islamic polity and society."²²⁵ It was the party's duty to usher in the final two stages. The older, conservative ulama were opposed to such an activist stance and they frowned upon the fiery rhetoric of Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, a young sayyid and one of the founders of al-Da'wa. But when the respected

Ayatollah al-Hakim died in 1970, many of his followers became followers of al-Sadr,

²²² Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 160.

²²³ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 113.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

²²⁵ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 81.

bolstering his power and imbuing al-Da'wa with more legitimacy.²²⁶ Al-Da'wa's radicalism was the source of both its success and its criticism; it alienated older, more quietist Shi'i scholars, but it also attracted Shi'is who had previously adhered to communism.

The Ba'ath Party's Relationship with Shi'is

Al-Da'wa's radicalism was the result of a conscious attempt to appeal to younger Shi'is, but it was also forced upon them from above. The Ba'ath Party quickly established a stranglehold on power and guarded it through the scrupulous monitoring of internal dissent. As early as 1972, John Galvani, writing for the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), discerned that "a close relative of Bakr's, Saddam Hussain al-Takriti, is the real power... and holds the posts of Vice-president, Vice-chairman... and Deputy Secretary of the Baath Party."

Galvani included the following picture in his report:

²²⁶ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 203.



THE IRAQI TRIUMVIRATE:
Al Bakr flanked by Tikriti [Hussein] (left) and Shehab (right)

His caption to the picture, “The Iraqi Triumvirate,” is an ominous and accurate attestation to the dominance of Saddam, al-Bakr, and al-Bakr’s cousin, Hammad Shehab.²²⁷ Opposition movements like al-Da’wa were targeted and driven underground; an internal document of al-Da’wa later complained that they had never harbored intentions of political action, but were “dragged into the political stage” by the Ba’ath.²²⁸ Whether or not this is true, what is clear is that the Ba’ath Party’s totalitarian methods forced allowed little room for dissent. The overwhelmingly Sunni Ba’athist regime had the means to suppress the Shi’i opposition.

The Ba’ath Party, however, was not always dominated by Sunnis. Between 1952 and 1963, 53.8% of various Ba’ath regional commands were Shi’i and the 1963 Revolution was carried out by a group that was 62.5% Shi’i.²²⁹ The ensuing decline

²²⁷ Galvani, John, "The Baathi Revolution in Iraq," *MERIP Reports* 12 (1972): 16.

²²⁸ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 81-2.

²²⁹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 1017, 968.

of Shi'i power in the Ba'ath Party was mostly a product of their lower representation in the military branch of the party, but it was also the result of an internal dispute. Many Shi'is supported 'Ali Saleh al-Sa'di when he challenged Michel Aflaq's leadership of the party's international body in 1963; when al-Sa'di was driven out of the Ba'ath Party, they followed him to his newly formed "Committee for the Iraqi Region," which quickly fell into disarray and left his supporters powerless.²³⁰ Few Shi'is still remained in the party by the time the Revolution of 1968 occurred, and by 1970, Shi'i representation had all but disappeared. None of the members of the 1970 Regional Command were Shi'i.²³¹ They were Sunnis, predominantly from the town of Tikrit, and they had established an iron grip on party power.²³²

The exclusion of Shi'is from the upper echelons of the Ba'ath Party was reinforced by the extensive patronage system that surrounded Saddam Hussein and Hasan al-Bakr. Having learned a valuable lesson from 'Arif and Qasim, Saddam and al-Bakr used traditional tribal structures to ensure the loyalty of their colleagues. Both hailed from the al-Bu Nasir tribe of Tikrit, which gave them a network of nearly 20,000 people to rely on.²³³ Loyalty was given to Saddam out of kinship, and he glorified tribal power to the extent that he once called the Ba'ath party itself "a tribe."²³⁴ Not only did Saddam's tribe naturally leave out Shi'is from top government positions, but he was also quick to denounce the Shi'i tribal relations that he deemed

²³⁰ Ibid., 1078.

²³¹ Francke, Rend Rahim, and Graham E. Fuller, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 97.

²³² Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 1088.

²³³ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 198-9.

²³⁴ Baram, Amatzia, "Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-96," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997), 1.

obstacles to national unity. Afraid that southern Shi'is might pledge allegiance to their tribes over their country, Saddam disrupted the power of the remaining tribal shaikhs through land reform and public declarations. Amatzia Baram notes that in a speech given by Saddam in 1970, he denounced tribalism, speaking

against the "reactionaries" [read: shaykhs], who spread "tribalism, religious factionalism [read: Shi'i communal and religious sentiments] and regionalism [read: Shi'i... reservations vis-a-vis Sunni Arab rule].²³⁵

This dual and obviously hypocritical policy of upholding Sunni tribalism on one hand and denouncing Shi'i tribalism on the other was effective in ensuring that Saddam and al-Bakr's power remained unchallenged.

The neglect of a consistent ideology towards tribalism is consistent with Saddam and al-Bakr's disregard for Ba'athist dogma. Saddam and al-Bakr's consolidation of power was effective in part because it did not depend on ideological differences. Elements of party doctrine were jettisoned when they became politically inexpedient. High-level members of the Ba'ath Party were systematically dismissed because they threatened Saddam's power, not because they disagreed with him.²³⁶ For Saddam and al-Bakr, the party was an extension of their personal power, rendering the party only nominally Ba'athist.²³⁷ Later, in 1982, the 9th Congress of the Regional Command of the Ba'ath accorded Saddam the title of "imperative leader," which formally signified that any decision he made would immediately

²³⁵ Ibid. 4. This is taken from the newspaper *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 7 July 1970. Comments in parenthesis are Baram's.

²³⁶ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 198.

²³⁷ Ibid., 193.

become the party line.²³⁸ Saddam's rule was ideologically much closer to fascism and totalitarianism than Ba'athism. His policy towards Shi'is was not an aberration but rather a typical response to a perceived threat to his power.

Saddam's stance towards Shi'is coalesced during a 1969 dispute with Iran and bore a strong resemblance to Feisal's policy in the early Mandate years. Threatened by Saddam's anti-Shah stance, Iran stepped up its aid to the Kurdish resistance and disputed the border near the Shatt al-Arab passageway. Hasan al-Bakr, who nurtured a reputation for personal piety, asked the Shi'i Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim to condemn the Iranian government's actions. When al-Hakim refused, al-Bakr declared the presence of an "Iranian threat" and used it as a pretext to expel roughly 20,000 people of supposed Iranian descent²³⁹ This was eerily redolent of Feisal's use of the Law of Immigration in 1923. Like Feisal, al-Bakr deported many Iraqi Shi'is under the false allegation that they were Persian and loudly pronounced the existence of an external "threat" to Iraq.²⁴⁰ 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif had also made this allegation, but conflating Shi'ism with loyalty to Iran evolved from an infrequent occurrence to a common tactic under the Ba'ath. Shi'is' loyalty to Iraq was challenged in such a way that they were forced to prove their fealty to their state.

The conclusion of the 1969 crisis illustrates the other two mainstays of Saddam's policy towards Shi'is, cooption and isolation. In response to al-Bakr's deportation of Shi'is, al-Hakim led a procession from Najaf to Baghdad that was supported by a Sunni religious scholar, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Badri. The government

²³⁸ Tripp, Charles, "The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics" in *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988 (Essential Histories)*, ed. Efraim Karsh (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1989), 62.

²³⁹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 202.

²⁴⁰ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 203.

became alarmed at the religious cooperation between Sunnis and Shi'is and cracked down on religion even further; they barred readings of the Qur'an in the media, arrested more Shi'is associated with al-Da'wa, and executed al-Badri. For a regime that frowned upon sectarian affiliation, this strategy oddly encouraged a sense of separateness among Shi'is by preventing them from cooperating with Sunnis. Yet afterwards, having defused the threat of sectarian collaboration, Saddam allocated more resources to Shi'is in order to draw them into his system of patronage. Like the tribal shaikhs and the Shi'i effendiyya earlier, this neutralized the Shi'i threat by providing an incentive for Shi'is to uphold the power of the state.²⁴¹ Shi'is therefore became implicit in the maintenance of order. When Shi'i ulama denounced the 1974 war in Kurdistan, the government arrested over thirty Shi'i leaders and executed five prominent members of al-Da'wa.²⁴² This time, no reaction came from Najaf. Saddam was effective in making Shi'is dependent on the government and ensuring that they were isolated from Sunnis.

The most serious threat to Saddam's rule before the Iranian Revolution occurred in the Marad al-Rus Uprising of 1977, when a series of riots erupted that were later described by the Shi'i opposition as the "first Islamic Revolution in the Middle East."²⁴³ The occasion was a march of 30,000 people from Najaf to Karbala in February, organized by al-Da'wa to protest the Ba'athizing of schools and the attempt to close Najaf for the Arba'in pilgrimage. Demonstrations turned violent and crowds stormed several police stations, chanting "Saddam, remove your hand! The

²⁴¹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 203-204.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁴³ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 211-212

people of Iraq do not want you!” (“Saddam, shil idak! Sha'b-il-'Iraq ma yiridak!”).²⁴⁴ Saddam, who had just been given the title of general by al-Bakr, closed down all study circles in the shrine cities and arrested over 2,000 people.²⁴⁵ He also arranged a series of show trials that tried, convicted, and sentenced eight members of the Shi'i ulama to death.²⁴⁶ The riots were large enough that the state media admitted for the first time that troubles existed in the south. They were not large enough, however, to overcome the immense power of the state and Saddam's willingness to use it.

The Marad al-Rus Uprising was also followed by gestures of goodwill towards Shi'is. Breaking from the earlier policy that had banned readings of the Qur'an in the media, Saddam adopted overtly Islamic tendencies to appeal to religious leaders. That autumn Saddam brought several Shi'is into the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the highest Ba'athist decision-making body, for the first time.²⁴⁷ Although Shi'is had occupied positions in the Regional Leadership (RL) of the party before 1977, the uprising and the appearance of Shi'is in the RCC were undoubtedly connected.²⁴⁸ Taken with his violent suppression of dissent that spring, Saddam's reaction to the Marad al-Rus Uprising is a perfect representation of his two tactics towards Shi'is, tarhib (intimidation) and targhib (incitement of greed). As Iraqis said, “he terrorized with one hand and offered rewards with the other.”²⁴⁹ Although this bears some resemblance to the British policy of supporting the tribal

²⁴⁴ Batatu, Hanna, "Iraq's Underground Shi'i Movements," 6.

²⁴⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 216.

²⁴⁶ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 216.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

²⁴⁸ Baram, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile," 454.

²⁴⁹ Batatu, "Shi'i Organizations in Iraq: Al-Da'wah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin," 195.

shaikhs on one hand and ensuring Sunni political dominance on the other, it is fundamentally different. Rather than buying off a small class of dominant Shi'is, Saddam appealed to the entire Shi'i community by bringing them into the orbit of the state and away from the clerics. This is partially a testament to the growth of the state from the Mandate period to Saddam's era. The British lacked the resource to integrate the masses. It was the increased resources at the disposal of the Ba'athists that allowed them to widen their circle of patronage.

Despite the discrimination against them, it is important to note that Shi'is increased their representation substantially within the Ba'ath Party during this time. At the time of the Revolution of 1968, there was not a single Shi'i in the Regional Leadership of the Party. This remained unchanged until the third Regional Leadership, when Baghdadi representation dropped and three Shi'is became representatives. In the fourth RL in January 1977, Shi'i representation grew to 43.9%, and the reaction to the Marad al-Rus Uprising brought Shi'is into the powerful RCC that fall.²⁵⁰ What may be more important than the sheer numbers of Shi'is is the strong evidence that Shi'i appointees were not merely symbolic. Shi'is were Ministers of Commerce, Industry, Planning and the Interior, important offices that gave power to the ministers who occupied them. The Ba'ath Party eschewed sectarian statistics because of their articulated desire to craft an Iraqi identity, making it difficult to know exactly how many Shi'is were in the RCC after 1977. Amatzia Baram estimates that at least five, but possibly as many as nine members of the RCC

²⁵⁰ Baram, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile," 453.

were Shi'is, making up 22.7 to 40.1 percent of the total. Even at the lowest estimate, this was significant. Before the republic was established it was not until the period from 1947 to 1958 that Shi'is made up over 30% of the ministerial appointments in the government.²⁵¹

The rise of Shi'is in the Ba'ath Party is directly analogous to the rise of the Shi'i effendiyya under the monarchy. The importance of Shi'is in the government and the capacity of Saddam Hussein to eliminate them was illustrated paradoxically when Saddam Hussein purged the RCC and RL and executed two Shi'i members in the 1980s. That they were executed because of their power shows their importance, but their execution demonstrates the obvious upper hand that Sunnis retained under Saddam.²⁵² Shi'is would succeed only as far as the Sunni elite allowed them succeed. Like the Shi'i effendiyya before them, the Shi'i in Saddam's government were Shi'i who were nearly indistinguishable from the Sunnis they worked with. Although they provided some solace to Shi'is who complained of the stark Sunni dominance in the early years of the Ba'ath, they did not represent sectarian interests and were especially hated by Shi'is in Najaf and Karbala. To include Shi'is in his government, Saddam created a new class of Shi'is completely dependent on his personal whims for their power.

The Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War

²⁵¹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: Third Edition*, 47.

²⁵² Baram, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile," 454-455.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution fundamentally changed the balance of power in the Middle East. Previously, Iran had not played an important role in the Middle East. By eliminating the Western-backed Shah and replacing him with the first modern Islamic state, the Revolution brought Islamism to the frontiers of the Middle East and drastically shifted the international paradigms surrounding Iraq. As Itamar Rabinovich writes, “Iran was no longer a large Muslim state on the periphery of the Middle East but part of a different Middle East, with altered notions of core and periphery.”²⁵³ The consequences of the revolution were dire for the Ba’ath. The threat of Islamism was intensified and the religious credentials of the regime were questioned. A modern military force was placed in the hands of a possibly belligerent administration. And most importantly, a Shi’i neighbor awoke and began speaking to Iraq’s most dangerous underprivileged group. The Iranian Revolution completely changed the nature of Shi’i identity in Iraq, as their identity became publically manipulated over the course of a bloody eight year war between the two countries.

The effect of the Iranian Revolution on Iraqi Shi’i opposition groups was to embolden their stance increase their prominence in Iraq. The rise of Iranian ulama to power reinvigorated the social status of Shi’i ulama as many Shi’is looked to them to emulate the revolution in Iran.²⁵⁴ It also brought more attention to Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and inspired al-Da’wa to engage in more direct confrontation with the state.²⁵⁵

Linkages between Iraqi Shi’i resistance groups and Iran intensified considerably;

Iran’s Arabic broadcasts dubbed al-Sadr “the Khomeini of Iraq,” and al-Sadr returned

²⁵³ Rabinovich, Itamar in *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988 (Essential Histories)*, ed. Efraim Karsh (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1989), 103.

²⁵⁴ Jabar, *The Shi’ite Movement in Iraq*, 36.

²⁵⁵ Batatu, Hanna, *Iraq's Underground Shi'i Movements*, 6-7.

the favor, declaring a three day holiday to celebrate Khomeini as the chief leader of Iraqi Shi'is.²⁵⁶ In Najaf and Karbala, Iraqis offered Khomeini salutations and praised him for his willingness to stand up to the West. Although Charles Tripp argues that the Iranian Revolution was “greeted enthusiastically [only] by those in Iraq already prone to welcome such a development,” the renewed opposition to Saddam is still significant.²⁵⁷ Even if Shi'is involved in religious movements were in the minority, the threat was taken seriously by the government and expanded into an issue for all Shi'is regardless of their piety.

Saddam's initial reaction to the Iranian Revolution and the Shi'i fervor surrounding it was his harshest reaction yet. In March 1980 membership in al-Da'wa became punishable by death, which was used retroactively to execute 14 Shi'i clerics in 1979 and 13 more in 1980.²⁵⁸ When the Shi'i Islamic Task Organization made an attempt on the life of the Deputy Prime Minister in the same year, Saddam arrested and executed Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and his sister, Bint al-Huda, within days.²⁵⁹ The execution of al-Sadr was unprecedented and timely. Al-Sadr was the first Grand Ayatollah in the modern history of the Middle East to be executed.²⁶⁰ Al-Sadr's execution decapitated the movement at a time when he was emerging as the ideological unifier of the Shi'i opposition. Murmurs of revolt in Najaf, Karbala, and the southern provinces were never heard again.²⁶¹ Although the Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim started an umbrella organization, the Community of

²⁵⁶ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 231.

²⁵⁷ Tripp, “The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics,” 66. The word [only] has been added for emphasis.

²⁵⁸ Francke and Fuller, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, 97.

²⁵⁹ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 229.

²⁶⁰ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 234.

²⁶¹ Tripp, “The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics,” 66-67.

Ulama (Jama'at al-Ulama), his Persian origins prevented him from gaining the support that al-Sadr had. As one Shi'i told Hanna Batatu in 1982, "In their heart of hearts... Iraq's Shi'is like things to grow from their own soil."²⁶² Of the eight marjas at the time, al-Sadr was the only Arab.²⁶³ While his death imbued the Shi'i movement with an aura of martyrdom, it also left it leaderless and unable to challenge the power of the government. This defeat was reminiscent of the defeat of Abu al-Timman, and, to a lesser extent, Salih Jabr and Fadhil al-Jamali. The Shi'i community was fragmented because it had no unifying leader, and it had no unifying leader because the Sunni establishment forbade one from developing.

The threat of Shi'i Iran, not the dispute over the Shatt al-Arab waterway, was the precipitating cause of the Iran-Iraq War.²⁶⁴ For Saddam, the rhetoric of the Iranian regime was more dangerous than its military might. The Iranian regime had launched a propaganda campaign calling for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, who Ayatollah Khomeini called an enemy of Islam.²⁶⁵ This resulted in a public war of words between the two countries, reported in early April 1980 by the New York Times. Khomeini first called upon the Iraqi people to "wake up and topple this corrupt regime" and advised the army "not to obey the orders of the foes of the Qur'an and Islam." To this Saddam retorted, "Anyone who tries to put his hand on Iraq will have his hand cut off without hesitation," which prompted Khomeini to

²⁶² Batatu, Hanna, *Iraq's Underground Shi'i Movements*, 8.

²⁶³ Marja, or marja taqlid, means literally "source to imitate" or "religious reference" and is used to refer to Grand Ayatollahs, who hold the highest authority in Shi'i Islam.

²⁶⁴ Grummon, Stephen R., *The Iran-Iraq War: Islam Embattled; The Washington Papers 92 Volume X*. (Britan: Holt, Rinehart And Winston Inc., 1982), 9.

²⁶⁵ Azhary, *The Iran-Iraq War: An Historical, Economic and Political Analysis*, 1.

respond that Saddam would be “dispatched to the refuse bin of history.”²⁶⁶ To the Ba’athists, Khomeini was suggestive of Gamal Abdul Nasser. They had learned their lesson well; where the communists and Arab nationalists had found themselves cornered by Nasser’s uncontrollable and unprompted popular movement, the Ba’athists were quick to neutralize any threat Khomeini might pose to their ideological dominance over Iraq.²⁶⁷ On September 22 1980 Iraq invaded Iran under the misguided belief that they would not be prepared to fight a war in the aftermath of a tumultuous revolution.²⁶⁸

Although the pretext for the war was the dispute over the Shatt al-Arab river, it was clear that this was not the primary motivation for the conflict. The Shatt al-Arab is located on the border of Iraq and Iran where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet, and pressure to precisely demarcate the border had increased since the growth of commerce and the discovery of oil in 1908.²⁶⁹ In 1975, Iran pressured Iraq into the Algiers Accord, which set the border along the “thalweg” line, or the deepest point in the riverbed.²⁷⁰ After the Iranian Revolution, Saddam declared this treaty to be null and void, claimed complete Iraqi supremacy over the river, and publicly stated his intention of taking back the Shatt al-Arab when he invaded in September.²⁷¹ It is clear, however, that Saddam’s intentions in invading Iran were to combat the ideological threat of the new regime rather than to gain a small segment of territory

²⁶⁶ Tahrir-Kheli, Shirin, *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 11. These quotes are from New York Times articles on April 9th and April 10th, 1980.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶⁸ Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988 (Essential Histories)*, 110.

²⁶⁹ Grummon, *The Iran-Iraq War: Islam Embattled; The Washington Papers 92 Volume X*, 7.

²⁷⁰ Hünseler, "The Historical Antecedents of the Shatt al-Arab Dispute," 19.

²⁷¹ Grummon, *The Iran-Iraq War: Islam Embattled; The Washington Papers 92 Volume X*, 7.

along the border. Even official party writings, which justified the war with the Shatt al-Arab dispute, admitted openly that Iraqi society was threatened by the possibility of a sectarian split.²⁷² War was not fought to destroy the other side but to keep Iraq together. Ideology was the most important component.²⁷³

The effects of the Iran-Iraq War were remarkably similar in Iraq and Iran. In terms of territory, manpower, and legitimacy, the Iran-Iraq War was a horrible failure for both nations. Iraq heavily underestimated the power of the Iranian military and its ability to mobilize quickly. The Ba'athist regime also failed to understand the effects of the war on Iran, assuming that the invasion of Khuzestan would fracture Iran along ethnic lines. Iraq had miscalculated badly again. The invasion was a blessing in disguise for an Islamic regime searching for a way to reconcile the promise of the revolution with its underwhelming aftereffects, and by 1983 Iran had reversed the course of the war. Iran, for their part, shared Saddam's speculation that Iraqi Shi'is might turn against the regime with Iranian help, but any uncertainties regarding the loyalty of the Shi'i population were put to rest when they displayed their loyalty in the war. The war would continue for a total of eight years before the two countries agreed to stop. Iraqis emerged battered, torn, unsatisfied with their regime, but, for the first time in history, identifiably Iraqi. Saddam's legitimacy was questioned within his own party and Khomeini openly admitted failure, but neither could deny the growth in national pride that accompanied the war.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Baram, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile," 464.

²⁷³ Grummon, *The Iran-Iraq War: Islam Embattled; The Washington Papers 92 Volume X*, 9.

²⁷⁴ Azhary, *The Iran-Iraq War: An Historical, Economic and Political Analysis*, 3.

Faced with an apparent decision between their Shi'ism and their loyalty to Iraq, Shi'is overwhelmingly chose to fight on the side of Iraq. It is impossible to know the specific numbers of desertion in the Iraqi army, but it is clear that rates of desertion from Shi'i units were much lower than those from Kurdish units, and they are statistically indistinguishable from rates of desertion from Sunni units.²⁷⁵ Coercion from the Ba'athist regime played a part in the solidarity of the military, but much of the submission of Shi'is to Iraqi command was wholly voluntary.²⁷⁶ In Basra, for example, an almost exclusively Shi'i garrison remained unmoved when under direct attack from Iran in the al-Faw Peninsula.²⁷⁷ Shi'is even made some headway into the officer positions traditionally dominated by Sunnis. Like the Revolt of 1920, the Iran-Iraq war "brought the Sunni and Shi'is closer together, if only by dint of their common suffering, and assisted the progress of Iraq towards national coherence."²⁷⁸ Efforts by al-Da'wa to reverse this trend had little effect. The Shi'i Iraqi resistance lay in Iran and found it very difficult to overthrow the government from abroad. The vast majority of the "Shi'i conscripts fought as well, or as badly, as their fellow soldiers."²⁷⁹

Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime was able to win the disgruntled loyalty of their Shi'i subjects through an aggressive propaganda campaign that stressed the Iraqi's national identity. Some of this rhetoric highlighted Arabism as the unifier of

²⁷⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 247. Note that units were not divided by ethnicity or sect. "Shi'i units" simply means units either of Shi'i majority or from Shi'i parts of Iraq. For notes on statistics, please see Tripp in Karsh, 67.

²⁷⁶ Tripp, "The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics," 72.

²⁷⁷ Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, 141.

²⁷⁸ Fernea, Robert A., Hanna Batatu. *Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*. London, New York: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 1991, 222.

²⁷⁹ Tripp, "The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics", 67.

Sunnis and Shi'is, but Saddam was also quick to construct a myth of Iraq's continuous history as a nation. The Ba'athists were cognizant of the fact that Shi'is had reacted negatively to Arabism in the past, making the new emphasis on "Mesopotamia" (read: a mythical, historical Iraq) appealing. Saddam took several measures to create such a history. He appeared on television often to praise the storied history of Iraq. He constructed a line of succession that traced his origins back to the Baghdadi Abbasid caliphs of the eighth century.²⁸⁰ In 1987 he held an International Music Festival of Babylon for an entire month in the ruins of ancient Babylon.²⁸¹ Although Qasim had pioneered an Iraq-first policy in the 1960s, the establishment of a fabled history of Iraq had no precedent. It was much more exaggerated than previous particularist attempts to unify Iraq.

Iraq's new Mesopotamian identity paid homage to the Shi'i community of Iraq. In fact, Iraq had a supposedly unique and storied "history" in part because of the influence of its Shi'is. The International Music Festival of Babylon was celebrated near al-Hilla in the majority Shi'i Babil province. Saddam's family tree not only stretched to the Abbasids, but pronounced him a descendant of imam 'Ali.²⁸² Military units were named after other Shi'i imams, Iraq's new missile was called al-Hussein (a reference to imam al-Hussein, not Saddam), and the president appeared publicly to celebrate the birthdays of both 'Ali and al-Hussein. The government's previous decision to ban readings of the Qur'an from television was reversed and air

²⁸⁰ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 225.

²⁸¹ Baram, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile," 464-5.

²⁸² Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 97.

time was specifically dedicated to the celebration of Shi'i holidays.²⁸³ The deliberate avoidance of the subject of Britain's role in founding Iraq and the conspicuous inaccuracies that dotted official party history did not escape most Iraqis. The effectiveness of the new rhetoric, however, was never disputed. The goal of Saddam's policies was to prevent Shi'i foot soldiers from either defecting or sabotaging the war effort.²⁸⁴ In this regard, the renewed focus on "Mesopotamianism" was successful.

The Ba'athist regime also indulged in negative stereotypes of Iranians. The Ba'athist regime had no qualms in perpetuating either the racial stereotype that Persians were treacherous or reminding Iraqis of their historical rivalry with Iran. Radio Baghdad referred to Persians as al-'ajam, a derogatory slur against Persians that literally means "illiterate" or "mute."²⁸⁵ The most explicit reference to ancient conflict with Persia was the description of the war as "Saddam's Qadisiya," a reference to the decisive battle in the Muslim conquest of Persia.²⁸⁶ The war with Iran was not a battle between Iraq and Iran. Rather, it was the renewal of a historic battle between Iraqis and Persians.²⁸⁷ To the delight of the Ba'athists, it was also not a battle between Sunnis and Shi'is. After Shi'is failed to defect at the beginning of the war, international alliances shifted when Syria, Libya, and South Yemen allied with Iran. This posed military problems for Iraq, but it was an ideological blessing in

²⁸³ Baram, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile," 464-5.

²⁸⁴ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 247.

²⁸⁵ Azhary, *The Iran-Iraq War: An Historical, Economic and Political Analysis*, 2.

²⁸⁶ Davis, Eric. "Rebuilding a Non-Sectarian Iraq." *Strategic Insights* 6, no. 6 (2007). 9 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2007/Dec/davisDec07.asp>>.

²⁸⁷ Francke and Fuller, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, 102-3.

disguise. Rather than fight a war on behalf of all Sunnis (or even on behalf of all Arabs), the Iran-Iraq War saw a more complicated system of alliances develop.

The collapse of potential sectarian conflict was also the result of Iran's desire to broadcast a universal Islamic message rather than a Shi'i one. To be sure, Iran sought to and anticipated a movement among estranged Iraqi Shi'is who adopted the cause of the Revolution against Saddam.²⁸⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini, however, was eager to lend the revolution significance that spread beyond Shi'ism to a more universal Islamic message. Before the revolution, Iran sat firmly on the periphery of the Middle East. The Shah highlighted the ancient Persian roots of Iran and downplayed Islam, signing a peace treaty with Israel and allying with the West against the Soviet Union. With the introduction of an Islamic regime and its hostility towards the West, however, the revolution catapulted Iran into the Middle East. Khomeini sought to expand the revolution by targeting the entire Middle East with his doctrine of Islamic revivalism. This strategy backfired; not only did Arab Shi'is oppose Iran, but the rest of the Arab World was much more intimidated by the message of the Islamic Revolution than the threat of a Shi'i revival.²⁸⁹ The gap between Arab and Persian Shi'is widened after the war. Although Shi'i groups in Iraq collaborated more with Iran, the ideological war between the two countries only sharpened feelings of distinction between them.²⁹⁰

The efficacy of Saddam's propaganda also ruined the efforts of Shi'i Islamist groups to recruit large numbers of Shi'i supporters. Both ideology and location

²⁸⁸ Azhary, *The Iran-Iraq War: An Historical, Economic and Political Analysis*, 113.

²⁸⁹ Rabinovich in *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988 (Essential Histories)*, 109.

²⁹⁰ Batatu, "Shi'i Organizations in Iraq: Al-Da'wah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin," 200.

contributed to their failure. Groups like al-Da'wa and the Mujahidin prioritized religious identity over national pride, a strategy which might have worked before the Iran-Iraq War. With Saddam's monopoly on state media and concentration on disseminating effective propaganda, however, Shi'i groups never stood a chance.²⁹¹ The nation remained at the center of their discourse – no Shi'i group advocated a union between Iraq and Iran – but was absent in their theological doctrine.²⁹² The second cause of the Islamist's inefficacy was their location. In 1979, al-Da'wa moved its headquarters to Tehran, and Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim's party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), was founded in Tehran in 1982.²⁹³ For two groups who already had a high proportion of Persians, and for a nation that consistently warned of the Persian menace, this hardly improved their standing among Iraqis.²⁹⁴ The rise of Iraqi nationalism alienated Islamist groups and prevented them from successfully winning Iraqi Shi'is to their cause.

True to his policy of “tarhib” and “targhib,” Saddam offered Shi'is a greater role in the government during the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam promised that decisions would no longer be decided in the “dark labyrinths of power” and set up the first National Assembly since 1958, although it was completely at the mercy of the Revolutionary Command Council.²⁹⁵ That Shi'is made up 46% of the National Assembly in 1986, roughly matching their demographics, is more of a reflection of their participation in the elections than their power. And while the RCC stayed in the

²⁹¹ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 266.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁹³ Since the American invasion, the name of the SCIRI has been changed to the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC).

²⁹⁴ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 254.

²⁹⁵ Tripp, “The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics,” 61.

hands of the Sunnis, more Shi'is occupied important cabinet positions than ever before.²⁹⁶ Shi'is were not just offered positions for window dressing (although they were given that, too). The Ba'ath Party gave concrete and substantial shares of power to Shi'is to win their loyalty.

Conclusion

Striking similarities exist between the Iraq under the British and Iraq under the Ba'athists. Both powers subdued Shi'i unrest through an effective combination of concessions, patronage, and military power. Where the British incorporated Shi'i tribal shaikhs in parliament, the Ba'athists erected a petro-fueled welfare state that tied Shi'is to the government. Where the British allowed gradual Shi'i participation in parliament, the Ba'athists incorporated Shi'i ministers and created a new parliamentary body to satisfy Shi'i demands. And when opposition movements gained support, both powers were able to rely on the military as a guarantor of Sunni power. The effects of these regimes were similar for Shi'is. Faced with two insurmountable powers, Shi'is became (or remained) fragmented and failed to form a cohesive voice against their oppressors. Shi'is had flirted with power in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the Ba'athists were a reassertion of the Sunni dominance of the Mandate.

²⁹⁶ Baram, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: The Changing Features of a Collective Profile," 456.

Despite their similarities, one must account for the fact that the British were a foreign power and the Ba'athists were a domestic one. The domination of foreign powers over the entire Middle East made it much easier for Britain to control the ideological opposition to their rule. Under the Ba'athists, however, the Middle East was a different place. Not only did the Ba'athists have to cope with the influences of Islamism, they were also surrounded by independent countries that shaped a more complex international paradigm. For a government that ruled through intimidation and incorporation, changes in this paradigm were threatening. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Iranian Revolution in 1979 precipitated an eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. Nothing could be more threatening to the Ba'athist regime than a neighboring Shi'i power that publicly incited Iraqi Shi'is to revolt.

What allowed the Ba'athists to maintain their hold on power was the enormous growth of the state. Oil windfalls provided the regime with the resources to monitor internal dissent in a way that had never been available to the British. Shi'i revolts in the 1970s brought swift and comprehensive responses from the government that left the Shi'i movement crippled and leaderless. By the 1980s, the Ba'athists changed their strategy and took a more preventative approach to surveillance; it was reported in 1983 that almost every mosque, "hotel, coffee-house and restaurant" was monitored by secret service agents.²⁹⁷ It is important to note that the resources of opposition movements were also greater during this time, but they still had little chance of success against the Ba'athists. Resentment against the Ba'athists mounted, but the ability for collective action was stifled.

²⁹⁷ Hiro, Dilip, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 109.

Totalitarian power in Iraq also allowed the Ba'athists to influence Shi'i identity through propaganda. Shi'is were repeatedly told that their national identity took precedence over their sectarian affiliation, and any support for sectarian interests was conflated with a lack of national pride. The Iran-Iraq War saw the most insistent rhetoric from the state, as Saddam's verbal barbs with Khomeini cast Iraqis as noble warriors fighting an ancient battle against Persia. The climate of state-run media made it very difficult to propagate other narratives of national or sectarian identity and guaranteed that official party doctrine would gain traction among many Iraqis. When Shi'is failed to fight on the side of Iran during the War, it was partially due to their inability to counteract the dominant rhetoric of the state.

In the first chapter, it was argued that the British policy in Iraq did not constitute a "divide and rule" strategy. This is primarily a reflection of the state of the Shi'i community before the British; Shi'is were previously divided, so the British simply kept them from unifying. "Divide and rule" is usually used in reference to colonial powers, but the term may apply to the Ba'athists' policies towards Shi'is in Iraq. Unlike their status before the Mandate, Shi'is were relatively united in the 1950s and 1960s. It was the Ba'athists' aggressive policy of cooptation and intimidation that fragmented the community and led to the decline of the Iraqi Communist Party. The political vacuum created by the decline of the ICP was partially filled by the Islamists, but the political repression they faced prevented them from garnering the support that the communists had in the 1950s. The Ba'athists and the British ruled the Shi'i in similar ways, but the Ba'athists dismantled a previously existing Shi'i community.

Shi'is emerged from the Iran-Iraq War as a frustrated collection of disunited groups unable to express their common discontent with the government. Although the war placed heavy financial strains on the government, Saddam's stranglehold on power kept the country in the hands of his loyal tribesman and thwarted any nascent opposition movements. Shi'i groups had been driven either underground or out of the country. A surprisingly large number of Shi'is held upper-level positions in the Ba'ath Party, but like the effendiyya under the British, these ministers had little in common with the Shi'i masses. Mosques and political parties, the two locations for identity formation for Shi'is earlier in the twentieth century, had lost their ability to attract large numbers of Shi'is. The sentiment for opposition was apparent, but the mechanisms remained in the hands of the government.

CONCLUSION

Epilogue

This study of Iraq's Shi'is ends with the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, but the history of Iraq does not. With Iraq's final push into Khuzestan and the al-Faw Peninsula, the border remained in the same place it had been before the war, but little else was left unchanged. As many as 56,000 troops and 3,500 civilians (2,278, according to the Iraqi government's official count) were killed, and Saddam found himself struggling to pay off an enormous \$14 billion dollar debt to Kuwait.²⁹⁸ Perhaps most importantly, however, the end of the war meant the end of the rhetorical campaign that justified the existence of Iraq through the conflict it waged. Saddam had stoked the flames of nationalism to conceal Iraq's own domestic insecurity for ten years. The disappearance of war changed the international paradigm that Saddam had helped construct.

Saddam wasted no time in engaging himself in another conflict, this time with Kuwait in August of 1990. Saddam's historical claim to Kuwait was actually much stronger than his previous historical claim to Khuzestan and the Shatt al-Arab; Kuwait was a part of the Basra province under the Ottomans, and when Britain designated Kuwait's borders, they intentionally gave Kuwait a portion of southern Iraq to obstruct Iraq's path to the Persian Gulf. If Saddam's invasion of Kuwait had anything to do with history, however, it was only in relation to the immediate past. Iraq's mounting debt, unemployed (and restless) soldiers, and destroyed oil pipelines

²⁹⁸ Kelly, Jack. "Estimates of deaths in first war still in dispute." *Pittsburg Post-Gazette* 16 Feb. 2003. 3 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.post-gazette.com/nation/20030216casualty0216p5.asp>>

were the real motives behind the invasion of Kuwait. In addition, Saddam feared the domestic consequences of international peace. Shi'is had been more successful in protesting the government in the 1970s than they had been during the Iran-Iraq War. The conclusion was clear: Iraq was most tranquil when at war.

In invading Kuwait, Saddam miscalculated again. Saddam underestimated the strength of the Iranian military before the Iran-Iraq War, and this time he miscalculated the willingness of international powers to intervene on Kuwait's behalf. Within six months the United States and its allies had attacked Iraq. They used their air power against the vulnerable Iraqi ground forces and drove them out of Kuwait within weeks, where they continued into southern Iraq. Iraq surrendered in February 1991. The military infrastructure that Iraq built up during the Iran-Iraq War was severely crippled, and Iraq struggled to maintain its position as a regional power for the rest of the decade. Iraq was further isolated when the United Nations levied heavy sanctions on Iraq following the war.

The Gulf War almost toppled Saddam Hussein. In a much-discussed move, the United States stopped short of Baghdad and refused to topple the government, although the CIA's radio station, "The Voice of Free Iraq," urged Iraqis to revolt and exaggerated the force of the rebellion.²⁹⁹ Shi'is in the south took these words to heart and captured southern governorates, calling on the same allied army that had bombed them to support their rebellion against the regime that had oppressed them for three decades. As a popular Iraqi phrase went, "the barrier of fear was broken" (hajiz al-

²⁹⁹ Fisk, Robert. *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*. New York: Vintage, 2007, 646.

khawf inkiser) by the rout of the Iraqi army in Kuwait.³⁰⁰ For three weeks the southern rebels had complete control over much of the south, but the rebellion did not last long. Saddam flexed his power, allied with the remaining tribal shaikhs, and crushed the rebellion with public displays of force.³⁰¹ Shi'is had expressed their discontent with the government, but they lacked the power to overthrow it.

Shi'i support for the military coalition led by the United States may seem to contradict the anticolonialist or anti-Western streak in their identity. While this support was certainly not in accordance with the ideologies of communism or Islamism, it continues a theme developed in 1923 and 1941. After the failed Revolt of 1920, Shi'is turned to the British in 1923 with a formal request that the British rule rather than the Sunnis. Similarly, many Shi'is in Basra refused to fight on behalf of Rashid 'Ali's forces in 1941, again calculating that rule by a foreign power would be preferable to a Sunni-dominated state. Support for outside forces in these occasions does not contradict the anti-imperialism of Shi'i movements and should not be confused with a lack of desire for self-rule. Support for foreign powers was a protest against Sunni rule, not an invitation for colonialism.

The timeliness of the southern uprisings against the state accords with previous discussions of state power. Saddam's rhetoric fostered some genuine nationalism and support for the cause against Iran, but Shi'is were primarily motivated by fear and a lack of an alternative course of action. That same strong Ba'athist regime that suppressed opposition movements was severely damaged in the

³⁰⁰ Makiya, Kanan, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq, Updated Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xiv.

³⁰¹ Baram, "Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-96," 8.

Gulf War. In a temporarily handicapped state Shi'is saw a window of opportunity, and they took advantage of the occasion to rise up against the Ba'athists. As the third chapter of this thesis puts forth, the lack of collective action among Shi'is under Saddam was not due to a lack of discontent, but rather due to the totalitarian state that prevented its realization. While an uncoordinated Shi'i uprising was no match for a strong central government, it could compete with a nation in disarray.

A point should also be made about the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Because the outcome of the conflict is not certain at this time (April 2008), any long-term conclusions that might be drawn from the invasion are excluded. Iraq may return to normalcy, it may be invaded by (another) outside power, and it may collapse into civil war. What is clear, however, and what does deserve some discussion, is the sectarian polarization and conflict that followed the invasion. Originally greeted by an eerie calm of suspicion and expectation, the Americans have seen Sunnis and Shi'is engage in the most vicious and stark sectarian conflict in the history of Iraq.³⁰² In contrast to previous conflicts that have been shrouded by proxy parties and official excuses, political and religious life in Iraq is currently oriented around sectarian identity. Why, after a century without unity, have Iraqi Shi'is rallied around their sectarian identity?

One possible explanation for this question is discernable from this historical study. Iraqi Shi'is have expressed their most coherent voice when they are given an opportunity to participate in domestic politics, especially when this participation has

³⁰² Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 157. Nakash writes about the initial reaction to the American invasion: "The arrival of the American freed Iraqi Shi'is from Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th regime, but not from their own suspicions and grievances."

an effect on Iraq's international standing. They remain fragmented and lack unity in times when a dominant power suppresses them, whether this power is foreign or domestic. Although the Americans may appear similar to the British during the Mandate, the state was much weaker following the invasion than either the British Mandate or the Ba'athist regime. And like the 1950s, the effects of Shi'i participation in the government are important for Iraq's orientation in its regional politics. With a strong incentive to direct foreign policy and make their own claim on Iraqi identity, Shi'is have formed a more cohesive voice than ever before.

Conclusion

Iraqi Shi'is have occupied a unique position since 1920. They are, in effect, torn between two worlds; their Shi'ism makes them a minority in the Arab World, while their Arab identity makes them a minority among Shi'is. Both worlds have tried include or repel Shi'is at different times, making their identification with either characteristic particularly difficult. They are also, as recent converts to Shi'ism, inheritors of a Shi'i history and legacy that is not their own. Despite being ruled by Sunnis in the twentieth century, Iraqi Shi'is do not share the longer history of Sunni-Shi'i conflict that is often hypothesized as the cause for today's intersectarian strife. Their identity as Shi'is has emerged in the past two hundred years, and their identity as Iraqis has emerged in the last hundred.

The Shi'i experience under the Mandate was one of initial unity, eventual division, and limited rapprochement. The Revolt of 1920 saw Sunnis and Shi'is

come together through their local religious networks to oppose the imposition of British rule, but this was possibly the first and last time that the two sects were united in opposition. Their solidarity crumbled when the British formed alliances with tribal shaikhs and Sunni notables who exchanged political favors in order to ensure Britain's power. Sunnis, who had occupied most of the governmental positions under the Ottomans, inherited the Iraqi state, and Shi'is remained outside of it. With the decline of the mujtahids and the incorporation of the tribal shaikhs, Shi'is failed to form a widespread community that could articulate their identity. They remained fragmented and leaderless, unable to express a political voice.

This all changed after World War II. As the Middle East emerged from colonialism, Shi'is emerged with it. Shi'is began to reap the benefits of previous demographic and educational changes, casting off their religious networks by migrating to the cities and becoming increasingly influenced by regional ideologies. As Shi'is flocked to communism and reacted against pan-Arabism, they began to participate in politics and express themselves in a relatively consistent manner. The existence of several Shi'i Prime Ministers is often regarded as the high point of Shi'i involvement in government, but these Prime Ministers were actually quite isolated from the Shi'i masses. The greatest amount of Shi'i involvement was found in the Communist Party, and the close proximity of domestic and international politics provided Shi'is with strong incentives to participate domestically. Surrounded by Gamal Abd al-Nasser's pan-Arabism and the possibility of a unified Arab state, Shi'is fought for their interests in a more cohesive way than ever before.

The era of increased Shi'i identity expression and consolidation ended with the Ba'athist coup in 1968. Saddam Hussein's quickly engineered the decline of the ICP and the obstruction of new political groups, thereby returning Shi'is to their previously scattered state. But after languishing in the 1970s, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 vaulted Iraqi Shi'is into the international spotlight. With the Iranians attempting to incite a revolt among Shi'is, and with the Ba'athists attempting to thwart one, Shi'is were confronted with a barrage of questions about their identity. Saddam attempted to answer these questions with massive surveillance and a rhetorical campaign meant to instill a sense of national pride among Shi'is, and this campaign was largely successful. Shi'is fought for Iraq against Iran, and while they fought primarily out of fear, their actions reaffirmed their status as Iraqis.

Several trends are recognizable in these three eras. Shi'is did not (or could not) unite in opposition to a state that deprived them of the resources to do so. It was only when there was no dominant power that Shi'is could come close to expressing a cohesive identity, and it was only when Shi'is saw the political system as effectual that they identified through it. Even then, however, Shi'is viewed the government with suspicion; neither Salih Jabr nor Fadhil al-Jamali were as important to Shi'is as the Communist Party. Any notion of "unity in opposition" is clearly not ratified by the Iraqi Shi'i experience in the twentieth century. Shi'is were the most unified when they were least oppressed: that is, when the central government was weakest.

The tract of Shi'i identity in Iraq can be incorporated into a broader theory of identity groups, state power, and political expression. For a state to suppress the expression of unwanted identities, especially in the case where the government is run

by a minority, the most effective course of action is political dominance. Whether this dominance is insured by a foreign power or domestically administered is not necessarily important; the effects of both regimes can be similar in certain cases. What seems to be the deciding factor is the strength of the state and its ability to block opposition groups from accessing power. If political parties can participate in government, identity groups are likely to seek expression through them, but if there is no permitted outlet for discontent, unrest is likely to be spontaneous and uncontrollable.

The experience of Shi'is after the Gulf War and the American invasion appears to corroborate this theory. The state was weak on both occasions, although the reaction among Shi'is was different. After the Gulf War southern Shi'is (and quite a few Sunnis) attempted to spontaneously overthrow the Ba'athists and failed when they were unsupported by the coalition forces. After the American invasion in 2003, Shi'is were less active, skeptically waiting for the consequences of the invasion, much like they had in 1958 with the fall of the monarchy. Much of the Shi'i reaction to the American invasion was also a consequence of the Gulf War; as Yitzhak Nakash writes, "the arrival of the Americans freed Iraqi Shi'is from Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th regime, but not from their own suspicions and grievances."³⁰³ A near-century of political dominance, failed attempts at power, and empty promises left Shi'is cynical. Yet when it became apparent that their participation in government could have long-term consequences on their position in the country, they began to form parties that conveyed a relatively common identity. In this context, the fact that these parties were sectarian should be of little surprise.

³⁰³ Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, 157.

This study also shows that the division of Iraqi history into three eras is quite useful. To be sure, simplistically dividing up seventy years of history excludes many of the nuances of the twentieth century, most notably the times of transition: 1941 to 1945 and 1958 to 1968. But there are two ways in which the division of Iraqi history into three eras is useful. The first is that the three main international paradigms of the twentieth century – colonialism, independence and pan-Arabism, and internationalism – are expressed through this model. The second is that these three eras share many characteristics that separate them from each other. Not only are they expressive of international paradigms, but they are also expressive of Shi'i participation in politics, the power of the state, and the influence of international ideologies.

One of the intellectual arguments in the background of this thesis is the argument between particularism and constructivism. Shi'i Iraqi identity was essentially performative; Shi'is formed their identity through their actions and the circumstances around them, and their successes and failures further influenced the identity-formation process. The coherence of their identity is therefore only relative. All Shi'is have never and will never express themselves the same way principally because their identity is constantly changing. And while the theological or historical roots of their identity may be a factor in how they identify, they are certainly not the only (or even the primary) aspects of their identity. As Eric Davis notes:

The sectarianism that currently exists is the result of Iraq's political economy, rather than "ancient hatreds." The problem with much Western analysis of Iraqi politics is the use of conceptual prisms that employ simplistic and flawed conceptions of ethnicity and religion. Iraq is not unique in having ethnic and regional tensions. The key task is not to identify the existence of sectarian feelings, but to explain

why, *at a particular point in time*, such feelings are translated into violent behavior.³⁰⁴

As this thesis puts forth, the cause of Shi'i sectarianism lies in their relationship to the state, the power of the state, and the state's relationship to the world around it. Shi'i identity is coherent when expressible, but the community is disunited when it is dominated by a strong state.

³⁰⁴ Davis, "Rebuilding a Non-Sectarian Iraq."

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