



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

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## WHY ARAB IRAQ SURVIVES

By Fanar Haddad

### **Iraq is Disintegrating... Again!**

Iraqi nationalism, Iraqi social cohesion - "Iraqiness" -- is in disarray if not completely dead and buried. It is all too easy to mention that, after 10 years, the new Iraq lacks a unifying flag, a national anthem, internal sovereignty, external sovereignty, or a functioning central government. Indeed it often seems as if the national football team might be the last surviving vestige of Iraqi nationalism. Iraqis kill other Iraqis by the hundreds every month and the murderers are callously cheered on by some Iraqi demographic or another in the name of retributive violence. Meanwhile the voices calling for the division of Iraq into almost always absurdly named entities seem to be on firmer ground than ever -- their arguments taking on a "we told you so" tone. The survival of the Iraqi nation-state, even without the Kurdish north whose independence seems to be an inevitability constrained by time alone, is once again being debated. In short, many may conclude that, as 2013 draws to a close, the only thing more baffling than the levels of violence and cruelty is the fact that, 10 years on, Iraq still exists at all. Yet, as intuitive as such conclusions may seem, they remain fundamentally flawed in that they allow the violence and the profound social and political divisions of Iraq to obscure Arab Iraqis' tenacious belief in "Iraq." Beneath a deeply fragmented and intensely violent surface lies an insurmountable obstacle to any plans for the partition of Arab Iraq: the mythology of the Iraqi nation-state retains a considerable degree of emotional traction amongst Arab Iraqis and "Iraq" remains the canvass against which political imaginations are formulated in Arab Iraq. Despite the extent of disunity amongst Iraqis, the daily violence, and the consistent failure of the state to deliver, and regardless of the elusiveness of even the faintest glimmer of light in what often seems like an endless dark tunnel, Arab Iraqis have yet to imagine an alternative to the burdensome entity they call Iraq. In other words, partition is not a viable option for the simple fact that Arab Iraqis are not calling for it. This may very well change in the future but until then, partitioning Arab Iraq remains a topic of what-if history.

## Can Iraq survive?

Evidence of the sacrosanct emotional attachment to the concept of Iraq and the depth of social division are equally evident in Arab Iraq today. This paradoxical situation can be summed up as a condition whereby patriotic sentiment is alive and well but with polarized opinions and intense competition regarding the contours, content, expression, and the criteria for inclusion that are to define nationalistic manifestations of Iraqi patriotism. To illustrate, imagine a comprehensive survey of Arab Iraqi households asking respondents to suggest the best embodiment of an otherwise abstract "Day of the Martyr." The results are likely to be deeply divided and divisive. The reason that such a hypothetical survey is likely to be so contentious is that in the current atmosphere of inflamed communal relations in which the enemy -- the other -- is within Iraq's borders as much as beyond, demands will be made for group-specific events and tragedies to be represented in the "Day of the Martyr." Compounding this is that, throughout modern Iraqi history, internal conflict, grievances, and transgressions have been suppressed or ignored rather than addressed and provided with closure -- from the Assyrian Massacre of 1936, to the Iran-Iraq War, to the legacy of the Baath, to the bombings in today's headlines.

Commemoration, national mythologies, and the forging of a cohesive nationalism that can give political life to what is currently a convoluted popular patriotism requires a political effort from above. Yet, division and communal competition in Arab Iraq are nowhere more prevalent or more self-perpetuating than amongst Iraq's political classes. Rather than having the vision to try to build a new Iraq that transcends or addresses the very real divisions in Iraqi society, the past 10 years have seen Iraqi politicians rely on those very divisions as the path of least resistance toward garnering a political following thereby intensifying and solidifying social divides and institutionalizing them in the body politic.

The fragmentation of "Iraqiness" in Iraqi politics was embarrassingly illustrated in the [recent brawl](#) that allegedly erupted in the Iraqi Council of Representatives when one Iraqi politician raised the issue of the display of Ayatollah Khomeini's portraits on the streets of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. Earlier this year Khaled al-Mulla of the Iraqiyya bloc objected to the depiction and celebration of a foreign and -- nowhere more so than in Iraq -- contentious figure. This resulted in a heated exchange of words and ultimately an undignified parliamentary brawl. Later, former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari held a press conference denouncing Mulla's comments in the name of sectarian and, of all things, national unity. Can it be that Jaafari and others who rushed to Khomeini's defense are truly oblivious to the sensitivities that a portrait of Khomeini would arouse? Khomeini was a man generations of Iraqis were taught to hate as the embodiment of the Iranian enemy through eight years of full-scale war -- an American parallel would be an Osama bin Laden or a Ho Chi Minh billboard in Times Square. That Iraqi politicians were torn

apart not just over an issue of symbolism, but of foreign symbolism with explicit sectarian overtones speaks volumes about the state of Iraqi politics and Iraqi nationalism. Nor was this an isolated case: in the summer of 2012 [outrage](#) and [indignation](#) were expressed by Jaafari and other politicians over Iraqi Member of Parliament (MP) Ahmed al Alwani's description of Hassan Nasrallah as a liar and of Qassim Suleimani as an enemy.

The controversy over the Khomeini portraits shows the primacy that some elements of Iraq's political classes accord religious or sectarian symbolism. Indeed, this was how they justified their defense of Khomeini's portraits, as depictions of a venerated religious leader rather than a political one. It is not that these political actors lack a sense of "Iraqiness" or that their ties to Iran trump their belief in Iraq; rather, for them, "Iraq" is suitably -- if not ideally -- represented through religious or sectarian symbolism. Whether such views are held in obliviousness of others or in spite of them is open to debate. The Khomeini controversy also echoes that the Iran-Iraq war, and its many social and political calamities, has never been publicly addressed in Iraq. How could it have been when less than 12 months separated it from the invasion of Kuwait and Iraq's next set of calamities? Thirty years later, how are Iraqis to remember a war that was started by their leadership and that was both formative and devastating and yet yielded no discernible gain or benefit? The question is particularly vexed given that some elements of the current Iraqi political classes fought alongside Iranian troops against their compatriots.

Ironically, the Iran-Iraq war spawned two mega monuments ostensibly commemorating abstract figures of Iraqi nationalism: one to "the martyr" and another to "the unknown soldier." However, given how contentious Iraqi history is amongst Iraqis and given how consistently it is used to justify contemporary political calculations, neither "the martyr" nor "the unknown soldier" can fulfill the symbolic functions demanded of such monuments. The reasons relate to yet another obstacle facing would-be Iraqi nation-builders: for decades prior to 2003, Iraqi nationalism was intensely invested in the person of Saddam Hussein to the extent that state sponsored nationalism equated Iraq with Saddam and vice versa. Anything even remotely linked to the Baath era is thus a potential source of controversy due to the difficulty of disassociating it from Hussein in the perceptions of many.

The Baath's successors have as yet been unable to find a coherent replacement for the Saddam cult and the nationalist symbolism and frames of reference of that era. This is scarcely surprising given that the major anti-Baath opposition groups, particularly those that were eventually empowered, were ethnic and religious or sectarian groups; hence, the paraphernalia and symbolism of the Saddam cult that cluttered the streets of Iraq have today been replaced with a motley, at times contradictory, combination of sectarian, party-specific, and nationalistic symbolism. None of this can be called "state-directed" in the strict sense of the term: the Shiite

symbolism filling the streets of Baghdad, often literally replacing Saddam's images as in a Saddam mural being covered with a portrait of Ali ibn abi Talib, is a decentralized and often extra-legal affair. In effect there is little in the form of an official state directed nationalism; nevertheless the prevalent political climate and the empowerment of Shiite "Islamist" political forces has created an environment saturated with Shiite symbolism in all its various, even antagonistic, currents.

### **When will Iraqis turn on Iraq?**

Where does all this leave the Iraqi people or even the concept of an Iraqi people? Given the daily violence, the fundamental disagreements over the core elements of Iraqi nationalism, the absence of any statesmanship, vision, or competent nation-builders amongst Iraq's political classes and given the all but independent Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), can skeptics be blamed for proclaiming -- often with barely concealed glee -- the imminence of Iraq's breakup? Can Arab Iraqis themselves, exacerbated, fed up, and exhausted after a decade of misery, be blamed for finally giving up on the idea of Iraq? After all, what has Iraq offered them over the past 10 years and what are the chances that the coming decade will be any different? Is it not reasonable to wonder what "Iraqi people" is there to speak of when Iraqis are fighting on opposite sides of a sectarian conflict in neighboring Syria while their political leaders fight each other over portraits of Iraq's former enemy-number-one?

There remains every possibility that 2003 will prove to have been the beginning of Arab Iraq's end. However, judging by other contexts from across the globe, that there is no secessionist element in Iraq's catalogue of violence makes it more likely for Arab Iraq to persist in its unhappy existence. This is far from anomalous: civil war has often accompanied state (re)birth: from the United States to Finland to any number of post-colonial states to Kurdistan and so the list goes on. As such, violence, social division, and perpetually bickering political elites tell us much about a nation-state's political (in)stability but little about the likelihood of its continued existence.

All nation-states, from Switzerland to Iraq, are ultimately artificial constructs that are theoretically susceptible to breaking down into smaller units or merging with larger ones. The impact of artificiality on whether this happens is only relevant to the extent that it figures in people's perceptions. As long as people continue to believe in "their" country, the facts of history, the myths, half-truths, and even the lies underlying its existence will remain irrelevant. After all, it is emotional -- at times irrational -- attachment rather than the facts of history that make a people identify with their country.

Against all reasonable odds, 10 years of carnage and political drift have yet to yield any serious secessionist movements in Arab Iraq. Certainly pro-federal voices have proliferated in recent years even in previously unthinkable quarters where not too long ago federalism was a byword for treason. But federalism does not preordain partition and the passions aroused by both remain largely unfounded. While it is certainly fair to ask how long this belief in Iraq can last in the face of ongoing violence and political failure, and even though denying that Arab Iraqis are divided remains patently self-delusional, the concept of Iraq and "the Iraqi people" is far from dead in Arab Iraq even if it has long been a non-starter in the Kurdish north.

### **The enduring appeal of Iraq**

Between August and September, videos emerged of three separate but strikingly similar incidents in Baghdad: angry crowds of Iraqis lynching alleged militants who had allegedly attacked or were trying to attack civilian targets. The gruesome details in the three incidents are near identical. In each of the Baghdadi areas of Kasra, Shuula, and Jisr Diyala, a militant's corpse is dragged through the streets, beaten, stabbed, stoned, and mutilated before being strung up and burnt. Nevertheless minor differences between the three incidents are highly instructive in that they aptly illustrate the interplay between sectarian and national identities and the tenaciously persistent belief of Arab Iraqis in the Iraqi nation-state.

Jisr Diyala is an impoverished Shiite area on the southeastern outskirts of Baghdad. Indeed both the poverty and the area's Shiite makeup are clearly discernible from the video. In celebrating the lynching, the crowd is heard repeating the invocation of Mohammad and the house of the Prophet in the melodic fashion characteristic of the Shiites. At no point in the clip are references made to Iraq, Sunnis, or Shiites, indeed little beyond the invocation of the house of the Prophet is audible in the rather brief footage. In short, although there is nothing to suggest anti-Sunni sentiments, the Jisr Diyala incident is a Shiite affair as can fairly be expected in a Shiite area. Kasra on the other hand is a mixed area that in all likelihood has a Shiite majority. The behavior of the lynch mob in Kasra and the frames of reference it deployed differ from those of Jisr Diyala in a most indicative way. As the alleged would-be suicide bomber's corpse is dragged through the streets, amidst the deluge of blows, rocks, kicks, and profanities, a voice is clearly heard addressing the corpse with the following words: "Hey you, all these people standing here are all Sunnis and Shi'as, you pimp." Later, after several failed attempts, the corpse is set alight. As the flames burst, a roar of "*Allahu Akbar*" is raised by the crowd -- indeed throughout the clip "*Allahu Akbar*" is the most frequently heard rallying call. Most interestingly, in the midst of this euphoric outpouring of vengeful violence, this moment of raw, furious, spontaneous release, the chant that was eventually raised was none other than the old call to Iraqi sectarian unity: "*ikhwan*

*Sinna wa Shi'a, hatha il watan ma inbee'ah,*" followed by that most Arab and, in the current climate, rather antiquated retro-nationalistic chant: "*bil rooh, bil dam, nifdeek ya Iraq.*"

An interesting point highlighted in these videos is the difference in behavior and frames of reference between a mono-sectarian context and a context of cross sectarian participation. It is not that the people of Kasra are more nationalistic than the people of Jisr Diyala nor is it the case that the Shiites of Jisr Diyala are "more Shiite" than those of Kasra; rather, a more straightforward assumption would be that the sectarian other is at best absent in the clip from Jisr Diyala and hence irrelevant (as is the issue of sectarian relations) whereas the very fact that the mob in Kasra contained both Sunnis and Shiites made the issue of sectarian relations positively relevant to the situation: a mixed Sunni-Shiite crowd had laid its hands on a would-be mass-casualty suicide bomber, one of the most effective instruments to have torn Sunnis and Shiites apart over the past decade -- both literally and metaphorically; hence the unbridled euphoria, bloodlust, and triumphal proclamations of sectarian unity. "We" are punishing "our" enemy, the collective in question Iraqis rather than just Shiites or Sunnis.

The importance of context is further illustrated in the third video to emerge of an alleged terrorist being lynched and set on fire. The incident is said to have taken place in Shuula and, reflecting the social makeup of the area and its recent history, the chants raised by the crowd as the fires devoured the alleged terrorist were the lyrics of a famous Mahdi Army anthem: "*hi jinood ibn il Sayyid.*" A similar chant in mixed Kasra might, to put it mildly, seem impolite given the presence and participation of Sunnis in the mob. In short the differing contexts alter behavior and perceptions accordingly: in all-Shiite Shuula, the incident is more likely to be framed as the triumph of Iraqi Shiites over a failed anti-Shiite terrorist attack while the same event involving a mixed crowd in Kasra is more likely to be framed as the triumph of Iraqis over a terrorist attack. The most obvious thing to take from these videos however is the continued salience of the idea of "Iraq" and the "Iraqi people" and the continued strength of the elusive ideal of a pluralistic non-sectarian Iraq albeit one that has not been reflected in reality over the past decade. The videos should not be taken as an illustration of the certainty of happy sectarian coexistence in Iraq; rather what is visible in these and other examples is that sectarian plurality remains an accepted fact of life in Iraq. Until Arab Iraqis begin formulating alternatives to the Iraqi nation-state, formal partition of Arab Iraq will remain a non-starter regardless of the levels of violence, misery, or political failure that in all likelihood will continue to plague the country.

**Fanar Haddad (BSc LSE, MPhil Cantab, DPhil Exon) previously lectured in modern Middle Eastern history at the University of Exeter and, most recently, at Queen Mary, University of London. Prior to obtaining his DPhil, Haddad was a Research Analyst at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office where he worked on North Africa. He has**

since published widely on issues relating to historic and contemporary Iraq. His main research topics are identity, historical memory, nationalism, communal conflict and minority politics. He is the author of *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London/New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2011). His research at the MEI will focus on historical memory and narratives of state in the Middle East.

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