



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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## IRAQ'S SECTARIAN INHERITANCE

By Fanar Haddad

In many cases, the deluge of Iraq-10-years-on commentary seems to be preoccupied with apportioning blame and delving into questions that cannot but deteriorate into adolescent moralizing or ideological one-upmanship such as "was it worth it?" Or "was it right to invade?" The subject of "sectarianism" (here identified with the Sunni-Shiite divide), a morally charged and confused one at the best of times, has featured prominently in these polemics. This is particularly unfortunate given that a subject as complex and as multi-layered as sectarian identity cannot be reduced to the confines of an ill-conceived U.S. military adventure in 2003.

Since the invasion, many people in Iraq and beyond, repulsed by the ugly manifestations of sectarian entrenchment and ultimately sectarian violence have tried to find someone to blame. Such efforts have often been linked to views regarding the war: blame "sectarianism" on the Americans and their partners if you were against the war and blame it on any and everyone else, not least Arab Iraqis, if you were for it. However, whilst it is undoubtedly a momentous turning point in the story of sectarian relations, 2003 is by no means the first chapter. Suggesting that 2003 marks the definitive line between a sectarian and a non-sectarian Iraq is as misleading a view as one insisting on viewing sectarian entrenchment as the status quo ad infinitum of Iraqi society.

The invasion created otherwise avoidable conditions in which sectarian identity took center political stage and nurtured sectarian imaginations, fears, and suspicions by unchaining and inflaming *already extant* fissures in Iraqi society as shaped by recent history. Coalition authorities, Iraqi political elites, regional actors, elements of Iraqi society, pre-2003 history, and post-2003 events all conspired, wittingly or not, to create the perfect sectarian storm from which Iraq and indeed the region seem unable to now escape. In other words, soothing though it might be, attempts to assign a monopoly of blame to anyone will fail to stand up to historical and socio-political facts.

The pre-2003 roots of sectarian entrenchment and the pre-war roots of many of the new Iraq's other ills have remained relatively understudied. Perhaps the most crucial example of this relates to pre-war Iraqi views toward the Baath Party; after all, it was upon such views that the failed attempts at post-2003 nation-building were based. To begin with, the Baath was not a "Sunni regime" anymore than today's political order is a Shiite one. Nevertheless, under both regimes, the political culture in place resulted in varying measures of sectarian discrimination whether indirectly, for example through the conflation of tribalism or regionalism with politics, or

directly, such as through the state's policies toward sectarian symbolism and the expression of sectarian identity. This has resulted in distinct Shiite and Sunni positions regarding the pre and post-2003 orders and whilst these obviously do not encompass every Sunni and Shiite they are nevertheless coherent and salient enough to act as divisive political mobilizers.

Regarding regime change, it was the existence of such positions that made sectarian entrenchment all the more likely: whether based in reality or perception, the profound sense of Shiite victimhood under Saddam Hussein meant that Shiites, generally speaking, regarded the downfall of the Baath as *their* salvation as much as it was Iraq's. Conversely, there was no element of sub-national communal identity in whatever desire existed amongst Sunnis to be rid of Saddam Hussein and, even if glad to see his regime's demise, it was hardly likely for them to subscribe to a celebration so heavily tinged with someone else's mythology of victimhood and entitlement. Thus a divergence in historical memories regarding the Baath manifested itself as a divergence in views toward the downfall of the regime, the occupation, and the legitimacy of the post-2003 order. This is but one example of issues predating regime change that meant that the post-2003 era was perhaps always likely to carry sectarian overtones.

Nowhere were these dynamics more apparent or more consequential than amongst the former Iraqi opposition. Whilst we can quite justifiably criticize the coalition authorities for unduly emphasizing the relevance of Iraqi sectarian identities it is apparent that their views were heavily influenced by their prime Iraqi interlocutors, namely the Iraqi opposition. Throughout the sanctions era, when the Iraqi opposition-industry gained momentum, the centrality of ethno-sectarian identity in the opposition's efforts was plainly obvious. In fact, as Hayder al-Khoei has pointed out, the idea of basing politics on ethno-sectarian quotas was a pre-2003 invention of the Iraqi opposition dating as far back as 1992. The opposition's obsession with communal identity was understandable given that so many important factions were based along communal lines: many significant groupings were in essence ethnic or sectarian advocacy groups. Come 2003, it was such visions and readings of Iraqi history, so heavily enmeshed with feelings of unique communal victimhood upon which historical wrongs were to be righted, that were to be privileged by the coalition and ultimately by the gifts of office. In such a climate, that in 2003 Sunni Arabs had neither a significant sense of themselves as a differentiated group nor a myth of unique communal victimhood made their feelings of fear and encirclement all but inevitable particularly given that the newly empowered ethnic and sectarian political elites did little to assuage these fears.

As is well known, not all of the regime change's Iraqi architects and returning political exiles were ethno-sectarian advocates. However, even these (for want of a better word) secular oppositionists carried a vision of Iraq that, particularly when coupled with their more religious-oriented counterparts, served to broaden ethno-sectarian differences. Their almost pathological demonization of the Baath and of Saddam, even if carried out without an overt ethno-sectarian bias, neatly complemented ethnic and sectarian activists' understandings of recent Iraqi history. Their working assumption prior to 2003 was that the Iraqi people were overwhelmingly in agreement as to what the Baath era signified; with hindsight we can see how dangerous such assumptions have proven as exemplified by the continuing controversies surrounding de-Baathification 10 years after the demise of the Baath. Whilst the exiles expected a grateful people to be united in joy by their liberation from tyranny, what they found instead were a people so divided in their memory of the Baath that they had yet to definitively agree on the identity of those found in the mass graves.

Within Iraq, the decade or so preceding regime change similarly aided, though by no means assured, the emergence of communal-based politics after 2003. Feelings of unique sectarian victimhood were not the preserve of the political opposition abroad but were also mirrored amongst a significant segment of society within Iraq. This was reflected in the near-immediate outpouring of expressions of Shiite identity after the fall of the Baath and the eventual electoral failure of secular forces in the new Iraq's elections. Heightened religious self-perception -- inescapably leading to heightened sectarian self-perception -- was very much a feature of the sanctions-era. In 2003 this was perhaps best illustrated by the Sadrist phenomena that came as a rude awakening to the coalition and to the exiles who had scarcely been aware of its existence in Saddam's Iraq. The Sadrist phenomena also underlined the problem of religious and sectarian identities as vehicles for national politics: as nationalistic as the Sadrists may be, theirs is a distinctly Shiite version of Iraqi nationalism that leaves little chance for genuine cross-sectarian participation.

Another sanctions-era development that was to flourish after 2003 was the spread of Salafism. The extent of its spread in the last decade of Baathist Iraq is difficult to assess. However, as the recent scholarship of Joseph Sassoon shows, there can be no doubt as to its existence in numbers considerable enough to elicit the regime's concern. Furthermore, it stands to reason that Iraqi Salafi extremists did not emerge out of thin air in 2003 but were active and spreading their doctrines in pre-2003 Iraq. One such example is Taha al Dulaimi; since 2003 he has emerged as one of the more famous and most virulent of anti-Shiite Iraqi Salafi extremists. Dulaimi's website features footage of his sermons from sanctions era Iraq that provides us with a rare glimpse into the otherwise obscured world of pre-war extremist Iraqi Salafism. It is perhaps more than mere coincidence that the packed mosque in which he preached his unabashedly anti-Shiite doctrines in the 1990's was in Mahmoudiya -- one of the towns in the "Triangle of Death," an area that until recently was a byword for anti-Shiite violence.

The above is by no means a comprehensive account of the pre-war roots of the new Iraq's sectarian entrenchment; nor does it negate or excuse the role of foreign powers, regional dynamics, poor governance, and economic issues in the rise of sectarian politics after 2003. It is a brief illustration of some of the pre-war factors that made sectarian identity a likely feature of the post-2003 era. Or put another way, it is an attempt to shed light on the preexistence of various shades of sectarian entrenchment -- not necessarily equating to sectarian hatred -- and the existence in pre-war Iraq of divergent sectarian imaginings of what Iraq and Iraqi history meant. It was these visions, imaginings -- fantasies even -- of Iraqis and others that some actors tried to realize in the chaos following regime change. Their perhaps inevitable collision recalls Milan Kundera's lament that, "... history is terrible because it so often ends up a playground for the immature... a playground for easily roused mobs of children whose simulated passions and simplistic poses suddenly metamorphose into a catastrophically real reality."

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the examples given above is the divergence of historical memory. Who should Iraqis unite against? Saddam, the Baath, Iran, Israel, the occupation, terror, the "Safavids" or the "Wahhabis?" And what should they unite for beyond an as yet undefined "Iraq?" To clarify, which symbols, events, tragedies or triumphs from Iraqi history resonate with enough Iraqis to be able to embody "Iraq" and act as a rallying call? The exiles and many a supporter of regime change may have expected the Saddam era to be the symbol that unites Iraqis in a mixture of grief and relief. However, whilst the horrors of the Saddam era had the potential to achieve just that, the manner in which this idea was promoted proved divisive.

Where to for an Iraqi nationalism lacking *in even the prerequisite symbolic props of modern nationalism* such as an agreed upon flag or national anthem? Should Iraqis reach into the Baathi past in their search for unifying symbols or should they construct nationalist symbols from the carnage of the past 10 years? Should a monument honor the mass graves or the fallen in Fallujah? How will future generations deal with the post-war violence and should it be labeled terror or resistance? Will a convenient narrative of unity emerge regarding the civil war or will competing sectarian martyrologies continue to dominate the memory of those horrendous years?

These are not my abstract musings; rather, they are real and politically salient divisions in Iraqi historical memory that are evident in Iraqi discourse today and that, unless resolved, will continue to hinder a symbolically coherent Iraqi nationalism from emerging. There is no shortage of potentially pan-Iraqi symbols through which Arab Iraqis' very real desire for an all-embracing nationalism can be given expression. However, this potential will remain out of reach as long as the past continues to be used to validate competing sectarian victimhoods today. Given the pull of regional dynamics and the weight of sectarian martyrologies on popular perceptions of recent Iraqi history, it is uncertain when, if ever, competing victimhoods in Iraq will be replaced by a more inclusive imagining of the past that recognizes the sufferings and culpabilities of all and that can finally give substance to an otherwise hollow nationalism. Until then, to paraphrase James Joyce, it seems that History is a nightmare from which Iraq is struggling to awake.

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