



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

IRAQ IN CRISIS

BY PETER SLUGLETT

Current events in Iraq pose one of the greatest threats that an almost endemically unstable region has experienced for many years. In fact, the apparent suddenness of the capture of Mosul, and of Tikrit should not have come as a great surprise. As the map shows, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (al-Sham),¹ many of whose fighters are of Iraqi origin (although some are the sons of immigrants from the Middle East to Europe), has been occupying cities, and creating economic and political fiefdoms, in northern and eastern Syria at least since April 2013. In addition, everyday violence all over Iraq has greatly worsened over the last year or so. For a better understanding of all this, one needs to go back several decades, to the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing Gulf war in 1990-91, and the thirteen years of UN economic sanctions, all of which set the stage for the additional and even more terrible disasters that would befall Iraq with the US invasion of 2003. Let me begin with the invasion.

In 2003, Saddam Husayn had been President of Iraq since 1979, and its *de facto* ruler for many years before that. Thirteen years of sanctions (imposed after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990) had impoverished the middle class, devastated the country's infrastructure and created a generation of semi-literate, unemployed and generally unemployable young people. In addition, the state had virtually ceased to function in large swathes of the Iraqi countryside, leading (with more than tacit government encouragement) to the retribalisation of much of Iraqi rural society—in which the tribal leadership assumed many of the functions of the state. In addition rural to urban migration on an even larger scale than in the past had swollen the population of the outer suburbs of Baghdad.

The Iraqi state of the late 1990s and early 2000s was the classic Middle Eastern authoritarian dictatorship. As Joseph Sassoon's compelling study *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party*—based on captured Party documents—has shown,² Iraq was run on a day-to-day basis by a number of highly centralized and extremely brutal internal security services, all reportedly to the president or to a member of his inner circle. Any potential internal opposition had been quelled, and its members exiled, imprisoned, or executed. In ways comparable to contemporary Syria, all significant power lay in the hands of the ruler and his trusted lieutenants, the majority of whom were members of his extended family, or his childhood acquaintances, or fellow members of the Ba'ath Party from its early days of secrecy and clandestinity.

Although the sectarian factor was less significant in the 1970s and 1980s than it is now, both Saddam Husayn and his immediate predecessor Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr (President from 1968 to 1979) came from Tikrit, a town on the Tigris some 90 miles north west of Baghdad, located in an area whose population is entirely Sunni. The regimes of al-Bakr and Saddam Husayn thus continued the 'tradition' of Sunni dominance to which Iraqis had been accustomed since the foundation of the state. The population of Iraq is about 20 per cent Kurdish and 80 per cent Arab (there are other small minorities, but I'm painting with a broad brush), with some 55 per cent of the non-Kurdish population Arab Shi'i and the remaining quarter Arab Sunni.

For much of the period between the foundation of the state in 1920 and 2003, the Sunni minority, who inherited its position of dominance from the Ottoman period, behaved as if it were a majority, and generally resisted power-sharing with the Shi'is, a fact which caused increasing irritation to the 'real' majority, especially in the general context of the rise of secular politics after the Second World and of the wider spread of education throughout society. Sunni dominance was also furthered in the ideology of Iraq Ba'athism, which presented the history of Iraq and the Arab world in entirely Sunni Arab terms with little or no reference to the Shi'is and Kurds.

Sectarian affiliation began to matter more after Iraq invaded Iran in 1980. The shock waves of the Iranian Revolution, and its ambitious claims to represent or at least to further the interests of Shi'is everywhere, caused great anxiety to the Iraqi regime, while Shi'i political organizations in Iraq drew inspiration from it in equal measure, however much they were

persecuted by the Ba'th regime. Almost overnight, Iraq's very powerful, generally conservative-secular and pro-Western neighbour had completely changed its nature. Some inkling of what Saddam Husayn's regime in Iraq was 'really' like was its very close relationship with the Shah since 1975. Like many newly minted revolutions, the Islamic republic of Iran was eager to export its ideology, and did so to considerable effect, first in Lebanon, and later in Iraq. While Shi'is form only ten per cent of the world population of Muslims, in the Middle East they form 90 per cent of the population of Iran, 55-60 per cent of the population of Iraq and about 40 per cent of the population of Lebanon (and smaller proportions of the population of Afghanistan, Syria and Pakistan).

At this point it should be stressed that in spite of the evident ethnic and sectarian mix of Iraqi society, there had never been any attempt to create the kind of officially sanctioned and recognized sectarianism that has long existed in Lebanon. It was only with the US invasion that sectarian quotas were introduced for the first time, with devastatingly negative effects. That this was done reflects the fact that most of those involved with planning or participating in the invasion had little understanding of Iraqi or indeed Middle Eastern politics, and thought that the US would endear itself to the people of Iraq simply by overthrowing the tyrant and instituting some sort of majority rule, whatever they thought that meant. Of course, neither the Sunnis nor the Shi'is formed monolithic blocs, and both quickly split into factions, with an important division between those who had sat out the last years of Saddam Husayn's rule in Damascus, London, Teheran or Washington and those who had had little choice but to endure the dictatorship at first hand. And while many Sunnis occupied positions of privilege, the wrath of the regime had fallen on all its opponents, Sunnis and Shi'is alike.

The Coalition Provisional Authority, which lasted from April 2003 to April 2004, was generally held to be a disaster; it was also weighed down by notions of sectarian quotas, and was headed by Paul Bremer, a career diplomat with no experience of the Arab world. Bremer is probably best known first for his extraordinary decision to disband the Iraqi Army, and second for his almost equally impulsive implementation of a policy of de-Ba'thification, which enabled those whom the administration favoured to get rid of their potential rivals. Bremer's immediate predecessor, General Jay Garner, had advised handing over authority to Iraqis as soon as possible, but this did not find favour with the neo-cons at

the Pentagon, who thought they knew exactly how to build democracy in Iraq.

I cannot, obviously, give a blow by blow history of the US occupation, and our former colleague 'Ali 'Allawi knows far more about it than I do, having served as Minister of Trade and Minister of Defence in the cabinet appointed by the Interim Iraq Governing Council from September 2003 until 2004, and then as Minister of Finance in the Iraqi Transitional Government between 2005 and 2006. These were terrible years in terms of death and destruction; an insurrection against the occupation began in 2004, peopled largely by former members of the army that Bremer had been so quick to disband. Sectarian elements were there from the beginning, since the officer corps had been almost entirely Sunni, but by 2006-07 the insurrection had developed into a sectarian civil war. Estimates of civilian deaths vary widely, but the findings of the Iraq Body Count are as follows:

2003: 12,104
2004: 11,428
2005: 16,114
2006: 29,009
2007: 25,275
2008: 9,618
2009-11: under 5,000 p.a.³

Most of the deaths occurred in 2006-2007. There was something of a lull between 2009 and 2012, but in 2013, 9,517 people were killed, and the figure for the first five months of this year has already reached 4,638—and according to the UN High Commission for refugees, half a million people have fled their homes in Iraq in the last few weeks.

One of the main problems leading up to the most recent outbreaks of violence has been the dictatorial tendencies of Nuri al-Maliki, who occupies the positions of Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Minister of Interior. Maliki's government is corrupt, profoundly sectarian and deeply unpopular among Shi'is as well as Sunnis, although particularly vilified by the latter. As well as mismanaging the economy, Maliki's overt sectarianism and his assumption of more and more power in his own hands have been disastrous. For many observers, Maliki's removal from the political scene is regarded as a necessary precondition for any efforts at national reconciliation. Maliki came to power in a deal brokered by Zalmay Khalilzad, the US ambassador in Iraq, and the British and American governments. Of humble birth (b. 1950) from the Shi'i middle Euphrates, and a staunch member of the Da'wa Party, Maliki left Iraq in 1980, and did not return until 2003. He spent

the intervening years in Damascus and Iran, during which, according to a recent article,⁴ he was responsible for all Da'wa operations in Syria and Lebanon (including, most probably, the suicide bomb attack on the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut in 1981) and was later in charge of a camp of Iraqi fighters in Iran, financed and controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁵ He is often described as paranoid, although in fairness he has survived several assassination attempts. Maliki is close to Iran and instinctively anti-American; his collaboration with the Americans was a marriage of convenience. He was and is regarded disparagingly by the more cosmopolitan Shi'i politicians who spent their own years of exile in Britain or the United States. The author of the article that I have just mentioned recalls seeing Maliki on television in Iraq in December 2013: 'His long face conveyed, as it almost always does, a look of utter joylessness.'

During his first couple of years in power Maliki did little to endear himself to the Iraqi public. He was largely responsible for the arrangements leading to the botched execution of Saddam Husayn, and the sectarian civil war deteriorated steadily on his watch. Things only began to improve with the US-inspired 'surge', the deployment of some 20,000 additional troops to Baghdad, announced in the President Bush's State of the Union address in January 2007. It took until mid-June, when all the additional troops had arrived in Iraq (eventually numbering some 28,000) for major counter-insurgency efforts to begin. In March 2008 Maliki showed a degree of energy by ordering the Iraqi Army to attack Basra, which had just been occupied by his Shi'i archrival Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Eventually, with massive American support, the Iraqi Army prevailed over the Mahdi Army, which was chased out of Basra. Although this certainly strengthened Maliki's position and his reputation, the incident also marked the beginning of his efforts to establish his personal authority, with no power sharing either with Kurds, Sunnis, or even with other Shi'is.

In the parliamentary elections of March 2010 Maliki's State of Law alliance lost seats to *'Iraqiya*, a multi-sectarian alliance led by Ayad 'Allawi. However, neither had a majority, and the Americans reluctantly concluded that they had little choice but to back Maliki again. For their part the Iranians obliged Muqtada al-Sadr to support Maliki in exchange for some key ministries and the appointment of the pro-Iranian Kurd Jalal Talabani as President. The Iranians also insisted, via Maliki, that the Americans should leave, and on 18 December 2011, they did, in spite of the fact that most political parties, and most Iraqi

commanders, wanted some Americans to remain to continue training Iraqi forces and to help fight the kind of insurgency the Iraqi Army is facing at the moment. As President Obama was almost equally keen for all US forces to leave, there was no real contest. In general US army and diplomatic officials were not pleased at what they saw as their administration's too ready acquiescence in Maliki's wishes.

Since the departure of the Americans, some of whom acted as a restraining influence, Maliki has continued his anti-Sunni campaign, purging all Sunnis from the National Intelligence Service, and dismissing anyone of any integrity who ties to stand up to him, including the governor of the Central Bank, the chairman of the Independent Election Commission, and the popular (Sunni) Finance Minister Rafi al-'Issawi in 2012. He has also subverted the independence of the judiciary by obtaining a decision from the High Court that gives him the exclusive right to draft legislation. There are many stories of bribery, extortion, and the siphoning off of Iraq's oil revenues, often involving Maliki's son Ahmad, to which Maliki apparently turns a blind eye.

Such activities have increasingly caused Sunnis to lose whatever confidence they might once have had in the government. In the most recent elections on 30 April 2014, Maliki's State of Law coalition got less than 25 per cent of the vote; in spite of this, he cobbled together a parliamentary alliance that ensured him another term.⁶ He has been Prime Minister for eight years, and his third term will in theory last until 2008. He has also apparently resurrected a Saddam-era law that makes it an offence to criticize the head of state. As well as alienating the Iraqi Sunnis, he has also managed to alienate most of the Kurdish leadership, and it is likely that the Kurds will not be ready to give up Kirkuk and the Kurdish parts of Arab Iraq, which they have occupied in the last few days.

In November 2013, as Islamic militants strengthened their hold on several towns in Syria and the security situation in Iraq began to deteriorate further, Maliki felt obliged to turn to Washington for help. The White House gave him Hellfire missiles and some 25 Apache attack helicopters. This situation, and the occupation of Falluja by Sunni extremists in January, seems to be the result of a combination of the fall out of the situation in Syria and Maliki's dogged pursuit of ever more extreme authoritarianism. According to Ryan Crocker, US ambassador to Iraq between 2007 and 2009, things have broken down within Iraq because the system the Americans created made them indispensable brokers or

middlemen both between Shi'is and other Shi'is (although here the Iranians also played an important role) and between the Shi'i and Sunni leaderships.

In a recent article in the *Guardian* (13 June) Toby Dodge argues that the present crisis is the result of a combination of the 'failure to build a sustainable and inclusive political system after regime change in 2003' and Maliki's authoritarianism. In all probability the US will simply go on supplying military hardware to Maliki rather than insisting that he either leave power or change his approach, and the 250 US troops sent in mid-June are unlikely to make a significant difference. My own sense is that while the activities of ISIS *in themselves* cannot pose much of a threat (given that there are only at most 10,000 militants spread out across northern and eastern Syrian and northern Iraq), a far more serious aspect of the situation is that a large proportion of the army and police in northern Iraq have, at least temporarily, handed over themselves and their weapons (including tanks and other heavy artillery supplied by the Americans) to ISIS. In addition, many tribal militias and local commanders in Anbar and other Sunni areas have also thrown in their lot with ISIS, whether out of disgust at the ineptitude, corruption, and sectarianism of the government in Baghdad, or out of fear of what ISIS might do if they do not cooperate (and there have been reports of mass executions by ISIS over the last few days)—or perhaps a combination of both. For its part, ISIS has proclaimed that it wants to set up an Islamic emirate, even an Islamic caliphate, in Syria and Iraq, and has ambitions to march on and capture Baghdad, tearing up the post World War One settlement in the process. Let us hope that those eager volunteers whom Ayatullah Sistani has called up to defend the homeland can stop them in their tracks—but at the same time, a change of direction, and a change of emphasis, is desperately needed from Baghdad.

Peter Sluglett is Senior Research Fellow and Director-Designate at MEI. He has taught Middle Eastern History at the University of Durham (1974-1994) and at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City (1994-2011), where he was Director of the University's Middle East Center. He has published widely on the modern history of Iraq, including *Iraq since 1958: from Revolution to Dictatorship*, 3rd edn., (2001, with Marion Farouk-Sluglett), and *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (2007). He has also edited and contributed to *The Urban Social History of the Middle East 1750-1950* (2008), *Syria and Bilad al-Sham under Ottoman Rule: Essays in Honour of Abdul-Karim Rafeq*, (2010, with Stefan Weber), and *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges* (2012). He is currently co-authoring a book on the modern history of Syria.

¹ al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi'l-'Iraq w'al-Sham broke ranks with al-Qa'ida in 2004.

² Joseph Sassoon, Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

³ See <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

⁴ Dexter Filkins, New Yorker, 28 April 2014.

⁵ Maliki is known to be close to the Iranian Quds Force and its commander General Qasim Sulaimani.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_parliamentary_election, 2014