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Adeed Dawisha: Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation

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Introduction

This book examines the political development of Iraq from the inception of the state in 1921 to the post-2003 years of political and societal turmoil. Its premise is that from the very beginning of the state the Iraqi project in fact devolved into three undertakings: the consolidation of the state and its governing institutions, the legitimization of the state through the framing of democratic structures, and the creation of an overarching, and thus unifying, national identity. The book is different from other studies of Iraq's political history,¹ in that it traces the development of each of the three projects of governance, democracy, and national identity separately, while at the same time highlighting the way they impacted and shaped one another.

The idea for this book took shape in the post-2003 period as I searched for answers and tried to make sense of the quagmire into which Iraq seemed to be sinking. A few months into the American occupation of the country, there were signs of a promising future: the end of a brutal tyranny, plans for a liberal constitution, hope for economic rejuvenation, and the possibility of a democratic Iraq that would become the beacon for fundamental political transformations in other Arab states, mired as they were (and still are) in authoritarian cultures and practices.

There were disquieting signs, too. The new masters, strangely unschooled in the complexities of the land over which they now held dominion, seemed unable to understand the nuances of the country they were supposed to administer. The Department of Defense had focused its energies and resources on winning the war against Saddam Husayn's army, but once that task was brilliantly accomplished in April 2003 the administrators of the victorious power dealt ineptly with ensuing post-war problems. Indeed, they contributed to these problems by implementing a number of

imprudent policies. One such policy was the disbanding of the Iraqi armed forces, which left a dangerous security void that was quickly filled by enemies of the new political order.

There can be little doubt that in the initial crucial months after toppling Saddam valuable time was wasted by the American administration in Iraq. While the civilian and military administrators dithered and meandered, Ba'athist diehards and disaffected officers, who had been in total disarray at the end of the military campaign, found time to organize against the new order. To the surprise of those who had followed the deliberate build up toward the war, the United States seemed to lack a comprehensive plan for the development and reconstruction of the country which the administration had promised, and indeed had intended, to embark immediately upon.² As the American effort began to stall, and the promise of a rejuvenated Iraq began to fade in the face of administrative ineptitude and indigenous violence, even those Iraqis who initially had welcomed the forcible removal of Saddam's procrustean dictatorship would soon begin to eye the American endeavor with mounting frustration. Later on, a few years of futility would turn frustration into outright hostility.

The hope that handing over sovereignty to the Iraqis in the summer of 2004 would steer the country back onto the path of purposeful governance and peaceful political development would soon dissipate as successive governments, first appointed by the Americans, later elected by the Iraqis, would fail in the most rudimentary functions of governance. Indeed, five years into the new era, the living conditions of Iraqis had sunk into an abyss of misery and malcontent.³ And this would be compounded by the inability of the state to provide security for its citizens. To Max Weber, who defines the state as possessing "a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force,"⁴ security is paramount. The state should be able to project power throughout its geographic domain, and if a threat to its dominance should arise, the state should have the capacity to subdue it. The post-2003 Iraqi state, however, was simply unable to meet these criteria. Neither in facing the Sunni insurgents, nor in confronting the various Shi'ite militias, were state security forces a match for their belligerent local adversaries. Five years after the collapse of Saddam's political order the state was still unable to extend essential services and provide a secure environment for

its citizens, with the result that in the perceptions of Iraqis, state institutions would recede almost into irrelevance.

But the predicament of post-2003 Iraq could not be confined only to the seeming failure of the state in discharging its basic responsibilities. Concomitant with the efforts by the Americans and their Iraqi allies to establish and cement the authority of the state, the results of which were middling at best, were two other projects: maintaining an internally cohesive social order and thereby sustaining an overarching national identity, as well as creating durable democratic institutions. As for the former, there were disturbing signs early in the occupation of a visible and vociferous rise of ethnosectarian loyalties as the primary elements of identity. The communal divide would soon become violent, spreading in scope with the passage of time, and the conflict would shift from a confrontation between the American forces and the “Resistance” to intracommunal violence in which Sunnis and Shi‘ites shed the blood of one another with seemingly carefree abandon. This inevitably would lead to the flight of over 2 million Iraqis to neighboring countries, and perhaps a million or so others displaced inside the country, as internal cross-migration accelerated in response to either targeted attacks and threats, or people’s propensity to be with their own folk in situations of pervasive violence and fear. What ensued was a country largely divided along ethnosectarian lines. Even the capital city, Baghdad, which had always been viewed and portrayed as the archetypal melting pot of Iraq’s various communities, became, five years into the new era, a perceptibly divided city with its eastern neighborhoods predominantly Shi‘ite, and its western areas mainly Sunni.

Nor would the third American project of creating resilient democratic attitudes and institutions meet with more palpable success. Sabotaged by ethnosectarian loyalties that were to lead to rigid political cleavages, democracy would become hostage to narrow particularistic concerns. In the wake of the December 2005 general elections, which created so much hope and optimism, by drawing four out of five eligible Iraqis to the voting booths, over 90 percent of parliamentary seats ended up being distributed among parties and coalitions that were all defined by ethnic and sectarian identities. Indeed the party with the largest number of seats, the Shi‘ite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) was formed at the urging of, and had as its mentor, Grand Ayatollah ‘Ali al-Sistani.

It came as no surprise therefore that the members of the national assembly, reflecting voter preferences, would succumb to highly partisan political behavior that focused on promoting narrow interests at the expense of the public good. Legislative achievements were notable for their stunning mediocrity. Unbridled recriminations abounded, but bills or initiatives of consequence for the country were hardly discussed, let alone acted upon. Indeed, as governmental ineptitude and societal fracture grew with time, the assembly members, the supposedly quintessential agents of the democratic ideal, likewise would distance themselves from the country's pressing needs and problems, responding to no urgency beyond the demands of their own political lethargy.

As America's footprints sank deeper in the treacherous quicksand of Iraq's discords and tensions, it was obvious that the seeming failure of the American project in Iraq was not just a failure of state institutions, but one also of molding a unified Iraqi identity and of fashioning robust representative institutions. The primary culprit, it seemed, was the prevalence of an entrenched ethnosectarian mindset that would disrupt institutional stability and turn democracy into an extension of the interests of competing local groups. In such an environment, doubts would be raised about the ability of the United States and its Iraqi allies to hold Iraq together in a fashion that would resemble the country that had existed for over eight decades.⁵

But was the American endeavor really so unique, indeed so alien, to Iraq that it was bound to fail? In fact, there is a compelling argument to be made that the probability of communal conflict was pretty high given the nature of Iraqi society and the Iraqi state. While American and subsequent Iraqi policies might have contributed to, even accelerated, ethnosectarian entrenchments, they did not create them. The fragility of the social order was structural to the land of Mesopotamia, and was a function of the complex relationship between the state and its institutions on the one hand and indigenous social units espousing complex identities on the other hand.

The narrative of a socially fractured Iraq and the way the state tried to deal with this seemingly structural problem did not arise after April 2003. The story is as old as the history of the Iraqi state itself, born from the forcible amalgamation of three Ottoman provinces after the collapse of

the Istanbul-based multi-national Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I. This was hardly unique to the case of Iraq; the post-World War I exercise of state-creation in the Middle East reflected the general reorganization of British and French imperial interests in the area.⁶ States were thus created not necessarily in response to the national demands of indigenous populations, but to satisfy the political and economic interests of the imperial powers. The resultant artificial creations were faced not only with the task of governing, an already difficult undertaking, but also with fusing multiple, and more often than not conflictual, indigenous identities and interests.

There can be little doubt that a major obstacle to stability was the country's manifold identities, which were complex as well as competing. From the early beginnings of the Iraqi state, the ruling elite and their British patrons recognized the potentially fissiparous nature of Iraqi society, divided as it was among Sunnis, Shi'ites and Kurds, and exacerbated by a pronounced urban-rural divide. A number of strategies were adopted to narrow the various societal dislocations: embracing an all-encompassing nationalism, advocating secularism, and endeavoring to build national institutions (schools and colleges, the army, the bureaucracy, etc.) to overcome fissiparous communal loyalties. The project to create a national identity, to sculpt a "nation" out of the different and disparate communities, became a critical undertaking as essential to the future of Iraq as building state institutions and creating an effective and credible process of governance.

The British and the newly crowned king also recognized early on in the monarchical period (1921–1958) that a key route to amalgamating the country's disparate groups into a coherent whole was through the construction of civic institutions. Concepts such as the rule of law, civil liberties, competitive elections, the guaranteeing of minority and other communal rights, et cetera would be incorporated into the body politic through constitutional design, with the hope that the different groups would be brought willingly into the political bargain. Thus, very soon after the state was born in 1921, the governing elite (which included the British during the mandate period, 1921–1932) agreed to hold elections for a constituent assembly that would, among other tasks, turn the infant country into a democratic, constitutional monarchy.

The problem, however, was that the two projects of building strong central governing structures, so vital for a socially fractured society, and of creating representative institutions that would legitimize the political order, but by definition would constrain governmental action, were bound to clash. Thus, members of the governing elite, while recognizing the benefits of democracy for the legitimacy of the political order, were also hardly enamored with the prospect of ceding power in a truly meaningful way. As we shall see, throughout the monarchy and into the first few years of the republican period, an almost schizophrenic attitude toward democracy existed among Iraq's rulers. This is clearly discernible in the country's uneven march toward democratic ideals and practices, in which democracy would go through an extended period of harassment, and then suddenly allowed to function, only to be harassed yet again. Even so, governance in the monarchical period was imbued with enough civility and self-restraint to allow it to tolerate oppositional views and activities, if not consistently throughout the time of the monarchy, then at least for significant periods within it.

The ethnosectarian societal structure and the idea of democracy were thus in no way unique to post-2003 Iraq; they presented similar problems and opportunities to the ruling elites in the more than eight decades that predated April 2003. The critical difference lay in the realm of political institutions. In the more than eight decades of monarchical and republican rule, government, parliament, political parties, civic organizations, et cetera never advertised themselves as anything but national institutions with national agendas. The motives for this stand may not have been particularly palatable to the ideological puritan. These were not the kind of intentions heartily applauded by the committed followers of secular nationalism. There was always the suspicion that beyond their constant and passionate proclamations of fidelity to the nationalist cause, the ruling elite, the bulk of which belonged to the Sunni minority, recognized their unquestionable need for a national project in order to defray the inevitable resentment of the other groups, especially the majority Shi'ites. Be that as it may, until 2003, Iraq's successive rulers presented themselves and advertised their policies as nothing but nationally oriented, even when at times reality fell short of the stated ideal.

In contrast, ethnosectarian factors were to become the main determinants of institutional structures and policy preferences in the post-2003 period. Governmental and bureaucratic positions were apportioned in accordance with ethnic and sectarian criteria, and this was publicly lauded and lionized as the only way forward for the country. Societal segmentation was also evident in the structure and purpose of political parties, and in the singularly partisan deliberations of the national assembly. In such a milieu, ethnosectarianism would be embedded in the body politic of the country, and would reside at the forefront of peoples' consciousness. There is no more compelling explanation as to why the Iraqi state remained resilient for over 80 years and why it unraveled so quickly after 2003.

Whatever the differences and similarities in the pre- and post-2003 Iraq, the one thing that emerges clearly from a discussion of Iraqi politics and history is that the Iraqi project was essentially three separate, yet inter-related, functional projects, each of which was pursued through a specific agenda, but all of which would have one common goal—the sustenance of an Iraqi nation-state. The task for Iraq's political elite throughout the country's political development was the building of state governing structures, creating a national identity, and fostering democratic institutions that would legitimize the state and its governing elite and help promote national consolidation.

The concluding chapter of this book tries to make sense of a simple yet pertinent query: is Iraq withering away? This of course does not necessarily mean the demise of Iraq as a legally constituted sovereign state, or its ultimate dismemberment. The question is whether there will be an Iraq that would resemble the country as it existed from 1921 to 2003, a sovereign, seemingly unified member of the international community. As I pondered this puzzle, it seemed to me that the most useful and effective way to make sense of the post-2003 apparent waning of the country—the failures of state institutions, the frailty of democratic attitudes and commitments, and the fragility of a coherent national identity—is through a systematic understanding of the same three projects as they were first undertaken by the British and the Iraqi ruling elites in 1921, and then developed during the life span of the country right through to the tumultuous happenings of the post-2003 era.