

IRAQ BETWEEN OCCUPATIONS

Perspectives from 1920 to the Present

Edited by Amatzia Baram, Achim Rohde, and Ronen Zeidel



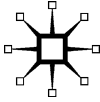
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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction: Iraq: History Reconsidered, Present Reassessed <i>Amatzia Baram, Achim Rohde, and Ronen Zeidel</i>	1
Part I Iraq between a Nation-state and Ethnosectarian Divides: A Reappraisal	
1 One Iraq or Many: What Has Happened to Iraqi Identity? <i>Phebe Marr</i>	15
2 The Clash of Identities in Iraq <i>Sherko Kirmanj</i>	43
3 On the Brink: State and Nation in Iraqi Kurdistan <i>Ofra Bengio</i>	61
4 Kurdish Leadership in Post-Saddam Iraq: National Challenges and Changing Conditions <i>Michael Eppel</i>	79
Part II Aspects of Iraqi History under the Monarchy	
5 Iraqi Democracy and the Democratic Vision of 'Abd al-Fattah Ibrahim <i>Orit Bashkin</i>	103
6 Women under the Monarchy: A Backdrop for Post-Saddam Events <i>Noga Efrati</i>	115

Part III The Ba’th Era and Beyond

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 7 | Revisiting the Republic of Fear: Lessons for Research on Contemporary Iraq
<i>Achim Rohde</i> | 129 |
| 8 | Sadr the Father, Sadr the Son, the “Revolution in Shi’ism,” and the Struggle for Power in the <i>Hawzah</i> of Najaf
<i>Amatzia Baram</i> | 143 |
| 9 | On Servility and Survival: The Sunni Opposition to Saddam and the Origins of the Current Sunni Leadership in Iraq
<i>Ronen Zeidel</i> | 159 |
| 10 | The Performance of the Iraqi Armed Forces in Operation Desert Storm and the Impact of Desert Storm on Its Performance in Operation Iraqi Freedom
<i>Col. (Ret.) IDF Pesach Malovany</i> | 173 |
| 11 | Management of Iraq’s Economy Pre and Post the 2003 War: An Assessment
<i>Joseph Sassoon</i> | 189 |

Part IV The United States in Iraq 2003–2007/2008

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 12 | Iraq after the Surge
<i>Michael Eisenstadt</i> | 211 |
| 13 | Amateur Hour in Iraq: A Worm’s-Eye View on the Failure of Nation Building
<i>A. Heather Coyne</i> | 225 |
| 14 | Until They Leave: Liberation, Occupation, and Insurgency in Iraq
<i>Judith S. Yaphe</i> | 239 |
| | <i>List of Contributors</i> | 261 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 265 |

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AMATZIA BARAM, ACHIM ROHDE, RONEN ZEIDEL
Haifa and Hamburg, February 2010

INTRODUCTION

Iraq: History Reconsidered, Present Reassessed

Amatzia Baram, Achim Rohde, and Ronen Zeidel

When the statues of Saddam Husayn came tumbling down in April 2003, the symbolic gesture was to mark the beginning of a new phase in Iraqi history. But the traumatic events in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the ensuing occupation of the country by U.S.-led coalition forces, the rise of communalism, and the country's barely arrested slide into civil war belied the optimistic forecasts of a country that would rise like a phoenix out of the ashes of dictatorship, and develop into a showcase Arab democracy at peace with itself and its neighbors. Whether this was indeed a genuinely held belief among proponents of the invasion or simple propaganda aimed at selling the war to reluctant international audiences cannot be determined at this point. However, it soon became obvious that the rebuilding of Iraq under U.S. tutelage would prove far more difficult than previously thought—and its success remains uncertain.

To further complicate things, there is no consensus as to what exactly would constitute a “successful” rebuilding of Iraq. Once the Pandora's box that was Saddam's Iraq had been opened, the centralized state all but collapsed, and a plethora of competing agendas regarding the country's future started to evolve from within Iraqi society. These agendas were often influenced in one way or another by neighboring countries, first and foremost Iran and Turkey, who follow their own agenda of securing political leverage in the evolving Iraqi polity. The United States, for its part, made some fatefully flawed policy choices in the early phase of the occupation, which

negatively impacted the country's chances for a quick recovery. By 2010 the United States still seems to lack a sustainable strategy to pacify and stabilize Iraq and assist its development.

The ongoing search for solutions and new horizons on the political level is visible in the field of academic literature published on Iraq in recent years. The country has long been a difficult area of scholarly interest, due to the restrictions placed on field research inside the country under the Ba'th regime, the lack of access to relevant sources, and the general opaqueness of domestic politics and decision-making processes. This state of affairs was inversely mirrored in much of the Western scholarship on Iraq, with its focus on the regime's inner circle and Saddam Husayn himself. Since the removal of the dictator, scholars who are aware of the rising communal tensions in Iraq have started to shift their focus to the perceived structural deficiencies that impeded the evolution of a viable and stable Iraqi nation since the founding of the modern Iraqi state by the British in 1920, and the Hashimite monarchy a year later. These research foci reflect the competing rationales of "structure" vs. "agency" for explaining the function of political systems. The visible shift of emphasis in the scholarship on Iraq since 2003 may also reflect the fact that students of Iraqi history and politics often tend to focus on the issues that dominate the political agenda at each given time.

From among the more serious works that were published on Iraq following the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, many were written by people who witnessed the aftermath of the invasion firsthand, as part of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) or as journalists (Diamond 2005, Phillips 2005, Etherington 2005, Shadid 2005, Packer 2005). Their works focus mainly on U.S. and international policy over Iraq, at the expense of penetrating observations of the domestic Iraqi scene and its historical background. The lack of historical depth in some recent scholarship on Iraq is contrasted by historiographic works that address the situation in post-Saddam Iraq by comparing it to the British experience in Iraq in the first half of the twentieth century. Some researchers point to similarities in these two cases. Toby Dodge, for example, concentrates on the often futile attempts of the Western occupiers to understand new and unfamiliar realities.

In Dodge's opinion, this difficulty accounts for similar errors that were committed by the United Kingdom and the United States, provoking rather similar reactions from the Iraqi population (Dodge 2003). In the revised, new edition of his study on the British Mandate in Iraq, Peter Sluglett also points to the similarities between the two experiences (Sluglett 2007). As historical studies, both books are valuable contributions, but the comparisons between the British and U.S. occupations result in a rather ambiguous

discourse. On the one hand, such comparisons seem to imply that every foreign intervention or occupation in Iraq is doomed to failure. On the other hand, they revolve around the question “what went wrong?” with U.S. and British policies, while downplaying the agency of the Iraqi side.

A second main area of research in post-Saddam Iraqi Studies is the rise of communalism and intercommunal strife, which is presented as the main structural factor that determined the torturous path of Iraqi history all through the twentieth century. Such works reverberate against the background of political debates regarding the rebuilding of Iraq as a loose federal state. Reidar Visser’s book on the history of southern Iraqi separatism, starting with an episode from Basra’s history in the early 1920s and ending with contemporary calls for federalism emanating from Basra, is a good example (Visser 2005). This theme is further elaborated in a volume that Visser coedited with Gareth Stansfield (Stansfield and Visser 2007), which deals with historical notions of regionalism in Iraq. In a notable departure from the conventional wisdom that highlights *religious* fault lines between Sunnis and Shi’is, these works recount the story of *regional* identities as a driving force for separatism or federalism in Iraq. All in all, studies with a “structuralist” focus often imply that by establishing modern Iraq, the British authorities artificially united disparate regions inhabited by diverse religious, ethnic, and tribal groups under the roof of a nation-state that never developed into a genuine nation (Lukitz 1995, Dodge 2003, Catherwood 2004, Sluglett 2007).

In response, other, mainly Iraqi, scholars rediscover Iraq’s Ottoman and Mamluk past, and find there the seeds for the subsequent emergence of Iraq as a state and a national community, based on an analysis of the economic and social history of the region (Abdullah 2003, Fattah 1997 & 2003, Haj 1997). Such debates regarding the historical authenticity of nations, and the projections of modern nationalism onto earlier historical periods, are common concerning any nation in the world, but they seem to be particularly salient in the Iraqi case, reflecting the instability of the current situation and the competing political agendas that are being pursued. A notable volume in this context that contains original research was edited by Shams Inati; its contributors cover a wide variety of subjects from Iraq’s ancient to modern history (Inati 2003). Although of high quality, the overall composition of the volume seems aimed at fostering Iraqi national pride, while ignoring the crimes of the Ba’th regime. Muhsin al-Musawi published a remarkable work on Iraqi cultural history that tracks the evolution of a national consciousness in modern Iraq, which he distinguishes from its instrumentalization at the hands of various rulers (al-Musawi 2006). Eric Davis has published a similar work focusing on the field of historiography (Davis 2005). Before al-Musawi

and Davis, Amatzia Baram studied the place of ancient Mesopotamia in modern Iraqi politics, historiography and art (Baram 1991). A concise history of Iraq, focusing mainly on the period from the 1980s to the early twenty-first century was written by Thabit Abdullah (Abdullah 2006). Other valuable recent works focus on a specific institution or aspect of Iraqi history throughout the twentieth century, like the armed forces (al-Marashi and Salama 2008), the Communist Party (Ismael 2008), and women (al-Ali 2007).

This book endeavors to explore a middle ground between these two trends. It juxtaposes external and internal factors during the processes of nation building and state formation in Iraq in the twentieth century. In this way, it examines continuity and change behind the major events in the history of Iraq, and places those events in a wider context. Whereas some articles discover the continuity that links major events to previous periods, others highlight the aspect of a break with the past, especially during the Ba'th period. Sensitive and highly controversial subjects for some Iraqis will not be ignored in this volume, which includes articles on sectarian and ethno-sectarian relations, the contribution of the British and U.S. occupations to state formation and re-formation, as well as internal dynamics within the various communities before and after April 2003. Acknowledging the existence of strong subdivisions in Iraq does not imply the negation of Iraqi national identity. On the contrary; it enriches Iraqi identity and makes it more accommodating, as acknowledging the existing differences opens the way for resolving outstanding tensions.

Downplaying the “structuralist” arguments that point to factors that impede national integration (as some Iraqi historians who are keen on stressing the authenticity of Iraqi national identity do), sometimes comes at the price of ignoring crucial developments. Thabit Abdullah, for example, never mentions the massive conversion to Shi'ism that took place in Iraq over the second half of the nineteenth century, leading to the current Shi'i majority (Abdullah 2003). Structural differences preceded the establishment of the Iraqi state, and the country's history seems to be marked by a dynamic interplay among the state, the economy, and societal structures such as sect, ethnic group, and tribe. Adeed Dawisha argues that when the state was strong, the government centralized and national identity prospered, while communal fault lines became less discernible (Dawisha 2009). Yet one must differentiate between a strong state, as Iraq was during the last decade under the monarchy, and a fierce state, as it was during most of the Ba'th era (Ayubi 1995). Communal identities and other structural factors should not be ignored, yet they should not be considered unchanging, as they are constantly reconstructed and adjusted to fit changing circumstances.

Very few books offer comprehensive overviews of modern Iraqi history from the late Ottoman period until today. For this, we still have to rely on the new editions of Phebe Marr's and Charles Tripp's excellent textbooks (Marr 2006, Tripp 2007), which, however, cannot possibly cover all aspects of this broad topic, as many significant features remain unknown due to the restricted access to relevant sources and archival materials. This is particularly true regarding the Ba'thist era, but also concerns earlier periods. As textbooks, their accounts are rather normative in style, and they do not allow for a discussion of the various schools of thought and interpretative paradigms regarding Iraqi history and present-day developments.

This book seeks to add a number of hitherto underresearched aspects to the existing body of scholarship on Iraq, covering the whole period from 1920 to post-2003. The volume is based on an international conference held at the University of Haifa in March 2007. It focuses on several crucial issues such as the rise of communalism and the development of other components of identity, including internal contradictions within each sectarian and ethnic community, the attitudes toward foreign presence, and the implications of those developments for the future of the country. This includes a comparative discussion of the British and U.S. occupations without, however, limiting our inquiry to the question "what went wrong?" or predetermining that all had to go wrong. The book also discusses often marginalized issues pertaining to the rise and demise of Iraqi civil society by offering studies that shed light on Iraqi women, liberal intellectuals, and democratic ideas during the monarchy. The volume thereby reexamines Iraq from the foundation of the nation-state to the present, and thus conceptualizes Iraq's present in a broader historical context.

While it does not solve the conceptual and interpretive divides that are visible in scholarship on Iraq, this book contributes to a more integrated and multidimensional understanding of the forces underlying Iraqi history by including different views on various aspects, which are presented by Iraqi Kurdish, Israeli, American, and European scholars. The studies assembled in this volume deliberately stress the agency of Iraqis, and most discuss Iraqi domestic affairs.

Probably the most decisive factor that stands in the way of a more integrated vision of Iraqi history is the Ba'thist period and, in particular, the rule of Saddam Husayn, which resonates in implicit and explicit ways in most of the studies assembled in this volume. How could this resourceful country descend into such a terrible abyss? How could Saddam's dictatorship have lasted so long? Is it therefore possible to speak of an Iraqi exceptionalism among the countries in the region? How much are the developments in Iraq since 2003 rooted in the period of Saddam's rule? To what degree are

communal strife and authoritarian rule the results of structural patterns that determined Iraqi history throughout the twentieth century? Unfortunately, compared to the growing interest in present-day Iraq and in the Mandate period, far less research has been conducted on the Baʿth period (1968–2003) in recent years. While the editors of this volume do not wish to downplay the difficulties involved in gaining access to relevant sources concerning the history of Baʿthist Iraq, we are convinced that gaining a deeper understanding of this particular period, many aspects of which remain unknown, is crucial for being able to grasp the present situation. Several chapters deal with related questions concerning the Baʿthist period. For Iraqis themselves, coming to terms with this particularly tormenting era is a necessary step on the way to a future national reconciliation that might transcend the present communalist revival. Understandably, this process will take time and hard work, and cannot be imposed from outside (though it can be encouraged). As researchers, we can merely unearth and critically investigate the historical evidence, thus preparing the ground for an informed discussion of the issues at hand.

The British and U.S. occupations constituted ruptures that gave rise to the notion of new beginnings, a process which, in both cases, entailed a denial of whatever preceded it. If, in the 1920s, this meant strongly denouncing the Ottoman legacy and playing down the country's history under Ottoman rule, after 2003 the same applied to the Baʿthist period. However, we assert that neither the British nor the U.S. occupations were totally new beginnings. Iraqi history in the twentieth century revolves around two major crossroads: 1920 and 1958. Though they constitute major breaks with the past, both contain some elements of continuity. The first date brought about the British Mandate and with it the creation of the state, the definition of borders, the establishment of a monarchy, and state institutions that perpetuated the Sunni dominance inherited from the Ottoman era. The second period was a time of decisive political and social change in Iraqi society. It led to the fall of the monarchy, the proclamation of a republic, the empowerment of lower classes in society, and the rule of the officer corps of the armed forces. As a consequence, ties to the former British colonial power were severed, and between 1958 and 1968, while the state undertook great efforts to improve the lot of the lower classes, it also became more repressive. The latter process reached its apogee during Saddam Husayn's presidency (1979–2003). Under his rule, another process that had begun in 1970 reached its peak: military officers were pushed out of political power back into their professional domain, and their place was taken by civilian party operatives (Baram 1989). This process, among other factors, might have contributed to the fact that after the fall of the Baʿth regime, a democratically elected

government easily managed to keep the professional military officers away from politics. April 2003 represents the third momentous watershed in the history of Iraq. It meant the end of Sunni dominance, and also the decentralization and consequent further weakening of the central state. These developments represent a major break with Iraq's past, but, at the same time, it should not be ignored that elements of this agenda, like civilian rule, a democratic trend, and opposition to a centralist state, had existed in Iraq right from the beginning.

The overarching consensus among all the contributors to this volume is that Iraq's history and its present are interconnected and shaped by a number of factors, some enforced from the outside and some grown out of particular and historically changing configurations within Iraqi society. The interaction of these various factors and their effects can be understood only by carefully looking at the *longue durée* of modern Iraqi history, by recognizing the ruptures while not ignoring continuities.

Part I of this volume dwells on the question of Iraqi nationalism in relation to competing political currents, first and foremost Kurdish nationalism. In a comprehensive discussion that opens the volume and takes up many of the issues discussed further on, Phebe Marr captures the oscillations and metamorphoses through which the political identity of the Iraqi people has gone between the late Ottoman era and today. The article includes an investigation of the effects that 35 years of Ba'hist and dictatorial rule had on the sense of "Iraqiness," and an outlook on post-Saddam developments. Marr argues that even in the unstable environment of present-day Iraq, where intercommunal hostilities are still paramount and conflicting interests are poisoning the political atmosphere, there are forces working toward the recreation of a sense of all-Iraqi nationalism.

While Marr analyzes the gradual crystallization, however fragile, of Iraqiness, Shirko Kirmanj conceptualizes Iraqi history since the establishment of the state, mainly as a clash among three competing nationalisms: pan-Arab, Iraqi, and Kurdish. He contends that Kurdish nationalists all through those years maintained a dialogue with propagators of the other currents. Kirmanj marks the first Ba'hist interregnum of 1963 as the turning point in the process of constructing Iraqi identity, leading directly to the violent repression of the Kurds (and the Shi'a) under the Ba'th. He makes first use of recently published sources in Kurdish. In sum, the article portrays the interaction between Kurdish and Arab nationalists in Iraq from a Kurdish perspective. Further elaborating on Kurdish-Arab relations in Iraq, Ofra Bengio offers an in-depth portrayal of the state and the nation-building efforts that are underway in the Kurdish region of Iraq. Unlike Kirmanj, Bengio stresses the significance of the last phase of Ba'th rule in Iraq,

particularly the years since the creation of a “safe haven” in northern Iraq by coalition forces in 1991. Bengio argues that a distinct national polity with political institutions and vibrant civil society structures is emerging in the Kurdish north of Iraq, and she discusses future options to further enhance Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. In his investigation of Iraqi Kurdish separatism, Michael Eppel focuses on the challenges that the ruling political elite in the Iraqi Kurdish region faces in convincing their public that seceding from Iraq is not a viable option. Eppel shows how the historic leadership is being challenged by a new generation of budding politicians who are criticizing the Kurdish government for incompetence, corruption, and nepotism, and are demanding more democracy and transparency in the administration of the Kurdish region. The chapter focuses on contemporary Kurdish politics, highlighting a new generation of Kurdish leaders, and emphasizes the differences between the latter and the old guard.

Moving on to Part II, which discusses aspects of Iraqi history under the monarchy, Orit Bashkin highlights some of the forgotten traditions of democratic thought and politics in Iraq, focusing mainly on the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, she portrays and evaluates the writings of the social democratic theorist ‘Abd al-Fattah Ibrahim, whose contributions to the vivid public debates of this period have until now received little scholarly attention, both within Iraq and in Western academia. Bashkin argues that current attempts at rebuilding Iraq as a democratic country need to be aware of and revive such traditions, lest they fall into the trap of reconstructing Iraq as the very authoritarian system that the invading forces set out to remove in 2003.

Remarkably, scholars revisiting the period of the British-backed monarchy (1921–1958), against the background of current U.S. efforts at rebuilding Iraq, have almost entirely ignored gender issues. By reading the current political struggle over Iraq’s Personal Status Law against the historical backdrop of similar debates during the monarchy period, Noga Efrati sheds first light on the historical context of the present struggle. She deepens our understanding of the positions held by the three main actors involved in today’s debates regarding gender equality in Iraq: women activists, Shi’i clerics, and U.S. officials. Efrati argues that current U.S. policies in this context are eerily reminiscent of British tactics during the monarchical era: they betray most of the values that the United States officially set out to defend by invading the country.

Part III focuses on the Ba’thist era and its impact on current developments. In its opening chapter, Achim Rohde engages in a discussion of interpretive paradigms regarding the Ba’thist era, and their significance in understanding current developments. Rohde criticizes the monolithic image projected by Kanan Makiya in his seminal study *Republic of Fear*. His chapter