

EXPLOSION AND EVOLUTION:
THE SUNNI-SHI'A CONFLICT IN IRAQ

1991-2013

By

Peter Daniel Clements

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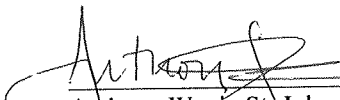
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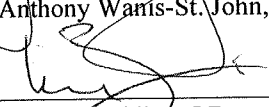
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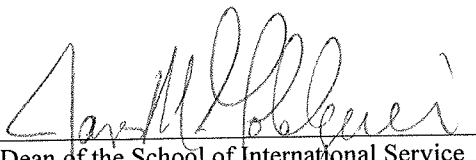
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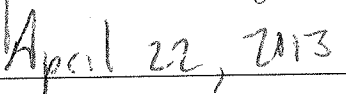


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ABSTRACT

The 1991 uprisings in Iraq's southern governorates following Operation: Desert Storm – and the decade of trauma that followed them – were the “Big Bang” that begat the modern era of Iraqi sectarianism and the Sunni-Shi'a divide. The memory of the 1991 intifada created new Iraqi Sunni and Shi'a identities alike, and set the stage for the period of open confrontation and civil war following the US-led invasion in 2003. The new, Shi'a-led Iraqi government now faces a retrenching Sunni opposition, and strives to get its own internal problems resolved, as the two sides find themselves locked in an increasingly non-violent (but also increasingly tense) stand-off. At stake are the future of Iraq and the safety of Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a alike.

Note on Naming Conventions

This thesis refers extensively to people, places, events and terms transliterated from the Arabic. Wherever possible, full names are provided when introduced and referred with the most common usage. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is referred to after introduction as Maliki, for instance, while the less-known Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei is referred to as *al-Khoei*. Events and terms from the Arabic are italicized in their first instance and followed with a definition - e.g., *mukhabarat* (secret police) – and printed as normal thereafter.

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Section One: The Proposal

This thesis analyzes Iraq's Sunni-Shi'a conflict: its origins, how it led to the civil war of 2006-2008 and what it means for the future of Iraq. The central thesis is that the enabling cause of Iraqi Sunni-Shi'a violence was the 1991 *intifada* (uprising) and the regime's reaction to it, a series of events that served as a template ever since for violence between not just Sunni and Shi'a but center and periphery, and in-group and out-group. 1991 was less than a generation ago. The current state of affairs in Iraq is thus not a result of "ancient hatred" or some sort of genetic-level, ethnic rivalry; rather, the civil war and ongoing Sunni-Shi'a conflict are largely the result of the policies of the Ba'ath and Saddam Hussein throughout the 1990s. Sectarian violence was not alien to Iraq prior to 1991, of course, but it was typically sporadic, spontaneous, and infrequent. The "clash of civilizations" logic and rhetoric of today's Sunni-Shi'a fighting is less than a quarter century old. A good first step towards understanding how this cultural infrastructure of violence was built and maintained by political leaders is framing it in terms perhaps easily understood by – and advanced by – Americans: republicanism and federalism.

In 2006, the chairs of the Senate Armed Forces and Foreign Relations committees had a simple plan for improving a worsening Iraq: split it up. Not literally, of course; the idea was more Articles of Confederation and less Sykes-Picot – and was proposed with some urgency. Iraq, a melting pot of myriad cultures, religions, and ethnicities with their own heterogeneous internal cultures, had devolved into its basest, Ottoman-era constituent pieces: a Sunni Kurd north, a Sunni Arab center, and a Shi'a Arab south. And all three, particularly the latter two, were inflicting on one another and the occupying interlopers violence medieval in its cruelty. A civil war raged from early 2006 to the middle of

2008; Specifically, this paper will identify the open, Iraq-wide conflict between Sunni and Shi'a – heretofore referred to as the Civil War, though it was merely the hottest phase of a still-simmering conflict – as lasting from February 22, 2006 to May 19, 2008.

Following this logic, the Civil War begins with the bombing of the al-Askariyya mosque in Samarra, and ends with Maliki's "house-cleaning" and the cease-fire with the Mahdi Army marking the completion of Operation: Knights' Charge in Basra. The statistics available at Center for Casualty Monitoring's "Iraq Body Count," culled from multiple sources, align strongly with these dates.¹ By the time Biden and many others were vying for the US presidency, the American electorate was only beginning to come to terms with what had just happened in Iraq, what had caused it, and what it meant for the future.

The Biden plan called for the partition of Iraq into thirds along historical and ethnically logical lines. The idea was to "establish three largely autonomous regions with a viable central government in Baghdad. The Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite regions would each be responsible for their own domestic laws, administration, and security issues."² There was a historical precedent of sorts; Iraq had emerged during the mandatory period from three Ottoman administrative units, which loosely mirrored the north, center, and south of today. Biden even went so far as to introduce to the US senate the non-binding "partition bill" which "called for the U.S. government to encourage Iraq's devolution into three semiautonomous ethno-sectarian regions, with a much-

¹ For more information, see <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>.

² Joseph R. Biden Jr., and Leslie H. Gelb, "Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2006, A19, accessed January 3, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/01/opinion/01biden.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Senator Biden also campaigned on this plan while seeking the Democratic Party nomination for Presidency in 2008.

weakened central government in Baghdad.”³ But it was perhaps too bold a plan, and even though it hedged its bets under the aegis of ‘federalism,’ the *de facto* split-up of Iraq into three separate countries was simply too radical for both the American electorate *and* the Iraqi people. Perhaps high-level, public discussions of federalism, by legitimizing sectarian divisions, made them worse.

Despite the violence Iraqis were inflicting on one another, disintegration or secession was the end goal for none of the major parties involved in the civil war. Iraq was moving towards partition *regardless*, as neighborhoods were ethnically cleansed and the Kurds settled into what seemed like a more permanent autonomous zone, with the Ba’athists no longer in power. The Kurds, it is worth noting, had long ago cracked the code required to live in a post-Ba’athist Iraq. But even they were cautious about even the idea of a separate Kurdistan, for fear of what violence it might invite from the Turks (who have hardly been shy about invading Kurdish areas of Iraq as it is.)⁴ Since the no-fly zone had been established following Operation: Desert Storm, the Kurds – despite being politically divided amongst two major, rival blocs – had largely figured out how to keep Baghdad out of their hair. Saddam Hussein’s personal hatred of the Kurds – and the attendant Ba’ath policies, to include the *anfal* ethnic cleansing campaigns, uses of chemical weapons in Halabja, and Arabization efforts of Kurdish lands – certainly exceeded his hatred of the Shi’a, at least before 1991. Until 1991, the Ba’ath and Saddam knew the Kurds, not the Arab Shi’a, to be the historical vector of Iranian influence and penetration.

³ Greg Muttitt, “Fuel on the Fire: Oil and Politics in Occupied Iraq,” (New York: The New Press, 2012): 253.

⁴ “Turkey Invades Northern Iraq,” *The Economist*, February 28, 2008, accessed January 3, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/node/10766808>.

Following the intifada of 1991 – in which Iraq’s southern Shi’a provinces, briefly seceded and were subsequently crushed and retaken – the Shi’a were clearly the *bête noire* of the ruling classes. It is, of course, painting with a broad brush to say that after the intifada the conflict was solely one of Sunni Ba’athists against Shi’a Arabs. For one thing, there were in fact Shi’a within the Ba’ath party. For another, the intifada was largely, but not solely Shi’a-driven. Additionally, ascribing religious motivations to either side within the conflict obscures, rather than reveals; certainly many involved in the uprising were agitating for economic opportunity and equity of state assets in addition to religious freedom, and certainly some in the Ba’ath were acting out of a sense of betrayal or a belief in the pan-Arab rhetoric of the Ba’ath more than any sort of Sunni identity. But Ba’ath policies were less a scalpel than a broadsword; much of the revenue extracted from the Shi’a was done by remodeling Ba’athism to incorporate more traditional, Sunni, central Iraqi religious and social elements which the Shi’a had no claim to and therefore were easily shut out of. This sort of broad policy – rebranding as much as anything else – cut out Chaldeans, Jews, Kurds, Assyrians, and others as well. But while the Kurds’ fortunes certainly improved with the 2003 regime change, it was the Sunni-Shi’a poles that reversed themselves. Shi’a gains that were readily defined as justifying the requisite Sunni losses, and it was Sunnis and Shi’a, with hardly any Kurds at all, that confronted one another every day in Baghdad. Turcomans, Circassians, Chaldeans and of course the famous Jewish community of Baghdad did not fare so well, however. Turkomans largely fled the violence of Baghdad to the north, building a clientist relationship with the Kurdish government, while non-Muslim minorities have all but disappeared from Baghdad and the country as a whole.

Ba'athist policies of distinctly Sunni religious language and distinctly anti-Shi'a law-and-order programs were still very much fresh in the minds of Sunni and Shi'a alike when Saddam and the Ba'ath fell in 2003. Gradually, spasms of looting, lawlessness, small-scale local score-settling and attacks on coalition forces gave way to a major Sunni-Shi'a civil war, fought largely on the streets of Baghdad.^A

In response, Biden sought popular support for a “soft partition” in his Op-Ed. After all, in 2006, the effects of several major initiatives – the U.S. troop “surge”, the Anbar Awakening, and an increase in targeted raids, all of which will be discussed at length later – had not yet been realized. For U.S. policymakers, the occupation of Iraq had turned into a quagmire; for U.S. troops, however, it was a literal minefield – 265 killed in the first five months of 2007 by improvised explosive device (IED) alone.⁵ U.S. troops were prime targets for a litany of Sunni extremist groups operating under the aegis of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an umbrella organization that counted al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) as its biggest member. Though AQI leader Abu Musab a-Zarqawi - who gruesomely introduced beheadings to the Iraqi conflict zone – was killed in 2005, the strategic targeting and instigation of the Shi'a that were his other major innovation created a climate of insecurity that prevented the consolidation of nascent state power and perpetuated a security vacuum. Civil war raged throughout the country's divided middle, re-drawing the map of Baghdad, while rival Shi'a factions aligned with opposing clerical schools saw their leaders literally hacking one another to death. Iraq had become a horrific, Hobbesian war of all against all; the U.S. electorate's patience dwindled. The U.S. was hobbled in its efforts to empower an Iraqi government capable of confronting

⁵ Gordon Lubold, “US losses in Iraq spike from IED attacks,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 23, 2007, accessed January 3, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0523/p01s04-usmi.html>.

terrorist groups on its own. Though each sect had its own internal divisions – from secular Ba’athists to extreme Salafists on the Sunni side, from hyper-introspective intellectual quietists to Marxists firebrands on the Shi’a side – the conflict between the two sects, occurring largely along the lines drawn in the 1991 intifada⁶, was increasingly seen as the main driver of violence. If Sunni and Shi’a couldn’t share power in Iraq’s unitary state, perhaps the easiest means of conflict resolution was simple separation.

This thesis will contextualize the Sunni-Shi’a conflict in Section Two: The Intifada, which introduces the relevant elements of Iraqi history. The thesis will then use some of the theoretical tools of political science and conflict resolution to reconstruct just what the playing field looked like immediately prior to the initiation of the civil war in 2006, in an attempt to understand why it happened when it did, and what the relevant parties’ aims were. It more deeply studies the case of the 1991 intifada (the uprising *and* the reprisal campaign throughout the 1990s) and examines it using the conflict resolution concepts of chosen victory (the uprising) and chosen trauma (the reprisals) to explain how it deeply shaped the worldview and political goals of the *entire* Iraqi Shi’a community. Section Three: The Awakening will examine the change in fortune suffered by the Sunni community following the fall of the Ba’ath who the strategic decision-making that dragged the group into, and more importantly *out of* the civil war. Section Four: Knights’ Charge will examine the worldview and governing strategy of Iraq’s current Shi’a leadership, specifically Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The Maliki government’s confrontation of their presumed brothers-in-arms, the largely Shi’a Basrawis, illustrates how Iraq’s new leaders govern with the lessons of 1991 and a perpetual Sunni-Shi’a

⁶ The nine governorates south of Baghdad to revolt – the so-called *muhafadhat al-ghawgha’a*, or ‘mob governorates,’ were Babil, Basra, Karbala, Misan, Muthanna, Najaf, Qadisiyyah, Thi Qar and Wasit.

conflict in mind. Maliki's increasing authoritarianism, and the urgency of the threats he is confronting, will be contemporary data points this paper will fit to the curve of post-intifada Sunni-Shi'a conflict. An understanding of this conflict will provide a clear vision of the challenges faced by post-Ba'ath Iraq.

Section Two: The Intifada

“When sectarian identity’s relevance is inflated... each group sees themselves as the sole representative of nation and faith.”⁷ – Fanar Haddad

The Ba’ath party ran an authoritarian state apparatus, and its removal in 2003 created a massive security vacuum. The Kurds in the north were spared a major system shock, as they had largely been responsible for their own security (or operating already under an American security umbrella, thanks to the No-Fly Zone of Operation: Provide Comfort). The sparsely-populated western desert of Anbar also saw as little of Saddam and the Ba’ath as they wanted, but for different reasons: the homogenously Sunni, hearty Bedouins loyally and readily staffed the Ba’athist government, and were left alone as a result. Anbari tribes had then been able to self-police and organize effectively, and thus hardly found themselves defenseless amid anarchy in the spring of 2003. But the rest of the country was less fortunate, conditioned throughout the 1990s to fear one another just as they feared the state, and to love the state for its protection from anarchy. Studies of the Iraqi state throughout the 1990s show a state transitioning from authoritarianism to totalitarianism, in which little of daily life is left untouched by the ruling party and the organs of governance and administration.

While a security vacuum might allow for a general breakdown in human security – with the attendant and crime, looting and personal score-settling - it did not guarantee a civil war. Rather the nature of the Sunni-Shi’a relationship since 1991, the key actors within the two sects, and the specifics of the security vacuum itself made the emergence of a civil war nearly inevitable. The security vacuum was an *enabling condition*; the sectarian divide was the *cause*. In order to understand why this was the case, the

⁷ Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, (New York: Columbia, 2011): 22.

historical inheritance of Sunni and Shi'a alike at the precipice of invasion need to be understood, as both groups (and many sub-groups within them) met the end of the Ba'ath regime with specific aims. The context is the relationship between the two sects, and how it changed and mutated (and was actively manipulated by elites and strategically-minded key actors) between the 1991 intifada and the 2003 invasion, between the 2003 invasion and the start of the 2006 civil war, throughout the 2006-2008 civil war, and from the end of the civil war to the present day. Across these phases, key actors within the sects - be they politicians, terrorists, or exiles (or all three) – operated within specific parameters and with specific political goals that explain Iraq's current situation. The great divide in Arab Iraqi society that begins in earnest with the 1991 intifada is the subject of this chapter. Subsequent chapters will focus on the Awakening and Operation: Knight's Charge in order to examine the divide from different perspectives, and draw conclusions about the Iraqi political system it's created.

History

Within Iraq's borders several ethnic and religious groups have lived, side-by-side, for centuries. Iraq's dominant demographic groups are the ethnically Kurdish Sunnis of the north, Arab Sunnis of the country's middle, and the Arab Shi'a of the country's southern provinces. Christianity seeped into Iraq almost immediately, supplanting local Mesopotamian religions. Islam would later displace Christianity and even Baghdad's Jewish diaspora, though the totality of this achievement is relatively recent.

In one of the earliest stages of the Arab conquests (*infitah*, or “opening”), Islam made inroads into Iraq quickly. Within a decade of the prophet's death, his successors Abu Bakr and Umar were responsible for Arab invasions of Mesopotamia that stopped only

when they ran into Persian resistance in the east – drawing rough borders that persist to this day. Indeed, many of the Shi’a religious sites contentious to this day are central to the initial schism, all of which occurred within Islam’s first generation. However, the tragedies of early Shi’ism – specifically the symbolism-laden martyrdom of Hussein - were victories for Sunni Islam, enabling it to dominate Iraqi Arab society for the following millennia. Only centuries after the golden age of Baghdad and the Sultanate would Shi’ism re-emerge amongst Iraqi Arabs. All the while, the Jews of Baghdad, as well as Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, Sufis, Turkomans, Turks, and Kurds remained. Group identities developed and waxed and waned over the centuries, but never saw neighbors turn on one another as in the near-pogrom conditions of recent years. Violent resistance to foreign occupation was, until 2003, more common than communal violence.

The demographically jigsaw nature of Iraq speaks to its existence at an ethno-religious crossroads. To its east, Shi’a and Persian Iran, heirs to the Safavid empire; to its south, the arch-Sunni Wahhabi Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, font of Muslim religion and the infitah that spread not just Islam but Arabians; to its west, Jordan and Syria, the former grappling with a disenfranchised Palestinian inheritance, the latter with a combusting mixture of Christians, Alawite Shi’a, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds; to its north, Sunni Kurds and the descendants of the Ottoman Turkish empire.⁸

None of these ethno-religious groups are monoliths and multiple divisions exist within each bloc. The Arab Shi’a, though ethnically indistinguishable from Anbari Sunnis (though alleged by some to be slightly darker-skinned) have been subdivided by colonizers and central governments into urban merchant classes, the urban and rural poor,

⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, “Iraq: Distribution of Religious Groups and Ethnic Groups,” *Iraq: Country Profile* (2003). Accessed via the University of Texas’ Perry-Castaneda Library Map collection; available online at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/iraq_ethno_2003.jpg.

and the so-called “Marsh Arabs,” allegedly a backward and barely-Arab social group “long viewed as a problem, rather as eastern European governments often looked on Gypsies.”⁹ Even the Marsh Arabs’ fellow Shi’a, in the mid-20th century, “despised the marsh dwellers because of what they considered the latter’s mixed blood, their practice of temporary marriage, and their name *ma’dan* or *al-ma’adi*, which outside the marshes connoted “yokel.””¹⁰ References to ‘mixed blood’ and ‘temporary marriage’ (*nikah mu’tah*) are familiar codewords to any Iraqi Arab listeners, with one connotation: Persian. The Persian wall to the east that stopped the *inifitah* has always held behind it the Persian ‘other.’

The extent to which Iraqi nationalist identity *transcended* sect is not the subject of this paper, but Iraqi rivalry towards and distaste for Persian neighbors has a long, proud tradition. Some Iraqis *do* identify more with the Iranians next door than with their in-country neighbors, but historically, most of them have simply fled across that border and formed the nuclei of organizations like the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, re-branded as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, or ISCI) and its paramilitary wing the Badr Corps. Even today, it’s still safer to be an Iraqi Persophile living in Iran, than one living in Iraq.

These intra-Shi’a divisions manifest as allegiances to specific Shi’a political parties and particular Shi’a religious leaders. For instance, Shi’a aligned with the al-Sadr family’s preaching tend to be the urban poor of places like Baghdad’s Sadr City, whereas followers of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani tend to be better-educated and typically aligned with

⁹ Juan Cole, “Marsh Arab Rebellion: Grievance, Mafias and Militias in Iraq,” *Fourth Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture*, (Bloomington, IN: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Indiana University, 2008): 5.

¹⁰ Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995): 47.

Iran-friendly Iraqi exile parties like SCIRI (the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and Da'wa ('Islamic call,' the other large, Iran-inspired and Iran-supported Shi'a party). These relatively recent political parties, and the separate Shi'a constituencies they cater to take advantage of a long-time trend in Iraqi Shi'a politics. Iraqi Shi'a were, by circumstances of personality as much as politics, never united under one ecclesiastical structure (as in Iran.) There has nearly always been a "lack of one recognized grand *mujtahid* (religious leader) who would act as the supreme Shi'i [sic] authority."¹¹

Broadly speaking, Iraq's Shi'a have long been divisible by their feelings on Persia; as early as 1925, "a strong struggle was observed within the Shi'ite religious establishment, which had split into two camps: the Persian camp led by [mujtahids] Isfahani and Na'ini, and the Arab camp led by Ahmad Kashif al-Ghita."¹² By the time of the Ba'ath takeover, and later Islamic revolution in Persia, Iraqi Shi'a were forced to define their political positions vis-à-vis Persia. The specter of their co-religionist and newly Islamic neighbor loomed over politics in a way that Shi'a in Lebanon, Syria, or Yemen never would.

Like the Old Testament genealogy in the book of Genesis, it is worth briefly stating who 'begat' whom, ideologically speaking. The quietist Muhsin al-Hakim trained the Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, a quietist eventually cleaved from the sidelines by his followers; al-Khoei tacitly (but publicly) supported the intifada, for which Saddam killed him in 1992. Al-Khoei was succeeded by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the consummate quietist, more concerned with issuing fatwas on mundane topics than participating even in the post-Ba'ath Iraq. Muhsin al-Hakim *also* trained his sons Abdul

¹¹ Nakash, 76.

¹² *Ibid.*, 85.

Aziz and Muhammad Baqir, who became "stalwart supporters of the politically active wing of the Iraqi Shia community," helping to found the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)."¹³ Abdul Aziz took over for Muhammad Baqir when the latter was assassinated in 2003, allegedly by Muqtada al-Sadr. Muqtada al-Sadr emerges from a separate lineage, which begins with his father's uncle Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (Sadr I) and then his father, Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (Sadr II). Like al-Khoei, Sadr II was killed by Saddam (in 1999), but in his case an intifada came *after*.¹⁴

While never truly revolutionary *en masse*, Iraqi Shi'a did find themselves essentially forced into one of two categories: the middle- and upper-class, educated, eastward-looking followers of clerics like Sistani, and the poorer, urban followers of more nativist preachers like Muqtada al-Sadr – who is believed to have arranged for al-Hakim's assassination in 2003 in order to consolidate power. In contrast to the politically active Sadrists and Hakimis, the "two families [who] have made political waves largely through their rejection of a quietist ideology,"¹⁵ Persophiles like al-Sistani were *less* politically inclined. This, despite his alignment with Iran's Qom clerics and the guardianship of the jurists, underscores the complexity of Iraqi Shi'ism. Sadr and his followers were, in fact, disenfranchised by the Iranians for political activity – specifically, for being too aggressive in their 2004 uprisings (Iran would eventually shift its focus to a breakaway

¹³ Nathan Gonzalez, *The Sunni-Shia Conflict*, (Nortia: New York, 2009): 96

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "The al-Sadr Intifada of 1999," *Ali Hassan al-Majid and the Basra Massacre of 1999*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (February, 2005), accessed January 23, 2013. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/iraq0205/3.htm>.

¹⁵ Gonzalez, 93.

Sadrist faction, in order to weaken Muqtada's influence).¹⁶ The persistent question of Iranian influence underscores the fact that none of these developments occurred in a vacuum – but Shi'a leaders like Muqtada or Sistani were hardly Iranian puppets.

The reality of foreign interference in Iraq is undeniable, but Iraq's foreign policy problems are of its own making. The image of Saddam Hussein as the Pan-Arab hero standing up to the Western powers had a great deal of cachet when he was at his peak, but much of this goodwill was destroyed when his invasion of Kuwait and threats to Saudi Arabia hobbled Arab economies by cutting off Gulf remittances. Iraq's neighbors have a history of turning on one another in peculiar ways; Syria turned against Iraq during Operation: Desert Storm, while Jordan stood by it; in 2003, these roles were reversed. When Syria and Iraq were Ba'ath competitors they were enemies, while the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan looked out for Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti. Nevermind that the Hashemites would have ruled Iraq as well, were it not for the military coup that would chart Iraq on a course toward Ba'athism.

Shi'a nationalist Hasan al-Alawi traces the beginnings of the late-20th century oppression of the Shi'a to the early-20th century Director of General Education Sati'i al-Husri, who attempted to limit the role of Shi'a in the historical narrative in favor of those adhering to the (Sunni) Ottoman socio-cultural norms inherited by Baghdad.¹⁷ Shi'a, however, were active participants in several anti-colonial uprisings throughout the early-20th century, and for a time served in leading roles during Iraq's brief Sharifian interlude. Going even further back in time, the Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala commemorates the

¹⁶ Joel Wing, "Analysis of the History and Growth of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, The League Of the Righteous, An Interview With Sam Wyer," *Musings on Iraq*, January 7, 2003, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2013/01/analysis-of-history-and-growth-of-asaib.html>.

¹⁷ Haddad, 43.

martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali and is one of the holiest sites in Shi'a Islam; it is a symbolic reminder of the salience and history of the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry that instigators can draw upon.

Iraq's Shi'a are recent converts. Many seminal Shi'a battles and events happened on Iraqi soil, yet the area around Baghdad was administered by Sunnis (be they Arabs, Turks, or Mongols) from the defeat of Hussein at Karbala on. In stark contrast to the Zaydis who would eventually migrate to Yemen and honor five imams after the prophet (hence the term "fiver"), or the centuries-old state Shi'ism of the Persians (themselves "twelvers") with whom Iraqi Shi'a were so often assumed to be collaborating, Iraq's Arab Shi'a converted only late in the 18th century and early 19th – making them the youngest Shi'a population in the Arab world. Iraqi Shi'a are a new enough demographic that "there is no evidence that would suggest... [they] were ever close to forming the majority of the population in Iraq before the nineteenth or even the twentieth century."¹⁸ The majority of Iraqi Shi'a tribes converted "only from the late eighteen century – and not beforehand." The conversion of the predominately southern tribes was regarded as "recent" in 1869, according to the Baghdadi scholar Ibrahim al-Haydari, while 20th century scholars place the conversions of major tribes such as the Zubayd, Shammar and Bani Tamim as "just before or during the nineteen century."¹⁹ Nakash also posits that these conversions were piecemeal and gradual, leaving individual tribes with followers of both sects within their house as recently as the late 19th century.

Also worth noting is that the conversion of the Iraqi Shi'a occurred immediately preceding an early wave of pan-Arabism – led by Sunni thinkers. Prominent intellectuals

¹⁸ Nakash, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

of the movement such as Rashid Rida described the pre-conversion state of the Iraqi Shi'a as practically *jahiliyya* (barbarism) anyway, calling "the current position of the tribesmen... better than their former status."²⁰ Within this milieu, Iraqi Shi'a rallied in spiritual support of colonized Sunni co-religionists in Libya. Shi'a mujtahid put their Arab, rather than religious identity at the forefront of their resistance to British occupation in 1919, and the revolt against the British in 1920 united Sunni and Shi'a in Kazimayn and Baghdad.²¹ Even Baghdad, the front line of the recent civil war, was only "Shi'ized" as recently as the 1940s and 1950s, with Shi'a more than doubling their share of the population of Baghdad between the two world wars.²² This is hardly the primordialist stuff of "ancient" or "genetic" hatred.

But this ethno-religious context is extremely powerful in framing the discourse used by Sunni and Shi'a alike.²³ While there exists "a venerable history of sectarian coexistence in Iraq and examples of sectarian harmony and cooperation can be found throughout Iraqi history,"²⁴ Sunni-Shi'a antagonism is not a new phenomenon. To Sunni and Shi'a alike, by the mid-20th century "violence had developed to be a part of the political game in Iraq."²⁵ The language of the time reflects this; the pejorative *rafidhi*

²⁰ Nakash, 44.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 59, 64, 66.

²² *Ibid.*, 97.

²³ Though the Kurds are not of significant interest to this research, their own discourse of chosen victories and chosen traumas, proto-nationalism, and pan-Kurdishness – filtered through their peculiar post-1991 status and decades of political infighting – is fascinating in its own right.

²⁴ Haddad, 55.

²⁵ Nakash, 124.

(rejectionist) is first deployed politically in 1948.²⁶ By 1950, at least some Sunnis were starting to see political power as a zero-sum game to be played with the Shi'a, seeing Finance Minister 'Abd-al-Karim al-Uzri making "'too many' Shi'a appointments to high office."²⁷ Political appointments were a scarce resource, and Sunnis (and presumably Shi'a as well) were realizing that anything office given to a Shi'a was an office taken away from a Sunni. However, as in the case of Republican Rome where the assassination of leaders like Tiberius Gracchus led to civil war, so too would seemingly "limited" violence at the top political levels in Iraq precipitate violence on the street.

Conflagration

By 1991 and certainly by 2003, the Sunni and Shi'a polities each viewed the others as their prime competitor in a zero-sum contest for political power. Probably feelings amongst Iraqis that they lived in a "zero-sum" society were much less prevalent in the oil-boom 1970s or even propagandized and mobilized 1980s. In the former decade, resources were certainly not distributed evenly, but the division was one of center-vs.-periphery more so than Sunni-vs.-Shi'a (the Kurds certainly did get left out, punished for the Second Kurdish War, which did not end until 1975.) Figuring national mood during the 1980s is harder, but certainly a large number of Iraqi Shi'a saw the Persian Shi'a they were at war with (and the frontlines were southeastern Shi'a areas like al-Faw)²⁸ as the greater political threat than their Sunni countrymen – it was the Iranians, after all,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁷ Nakash, 130.

²⁸ There was a second, northern front, in which the Iranians relied on Kurdish participation.

peppering Karbala with missiles and dispatching “human wave” and child-soldier *basiji* attacks.

And yet, the intifada.

The end of the Ba’ath created a new set of rules for Iraq, but the players and their motivations were determined in the 1990s. Despite the national trauma that was the Iran-Iraq War, and the national humiliation that was Operation: Desert Storm, it was the predominately Shi’a intifada of 1991, and Saddam’s set of policy responses to that, that predetermined the conflicts of the 00’s. “Groups in any long-term relationship each have their own narratives about that relationship,” conflict theorist Louis Kriesberg explains; “their narratives about past experiences help provide a context and a way of interpreting current inequalities and differences.”²⁹ The national catastrophe that was the intifada has come to dominate both Sunni and Shi’a narratives about their relationship with the other.

Arab Iraqis, Sunni and Shi’a alike, shared peculiar religious characteristics that for some time had kept a seemingly inevitable struggle for resources at a very low simmer. According to Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Shi’a Iraqi exile Kanan Makiya, Sunni and Shi’a “share a deeply rooted political sensibility regarding what it takes to rule Iraq,” especially since the Pan-Arab elements of Ba’athism could – in theory, if not reality – be embraced by both groups. As a result, “the fundamentalists on either side [found] themselves in agreement with Ba’athi ideologues in that all view themselves as the authentic ‘spirit’ of the people rising in hostility to an outside construed as “materialist,” “imperialist,” or simply morally and culturally decadent.” None of this is surprising, as Pan-Arabism and the Ba’athist trend were, like many nationalist strains,

²⁹ Louis Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006): 43.

deeply anti-imperial. But more specifically, “for a Sunni Arab, Islam and Arab nationalism find a synthesis in Ba'athism that can hardly be improved upon. Even the Iraqi Shi'ite, while struggling with his national identity, has a hard time demonstrating that the Ba'ath are not good Muslims.” But Shi'ism, according to Makiya, had a particular vulnerability to Ba'athism, that may account for why it never resisted Iraqi Ba'athism as fiercely as might have been expected: it has an “undiluted hero-worship; take away its object of veneration, or replace it with another, and you have transformed the relationship of the creed to those who wield power from one of rebellion to one of allegiance.” It is Makiya's conclusion about Sunni and Shi'a Iraqi Arab alike that “these same commonalities that facilitate coexistence under a single authoritarian polity also lead Shi'ism and Ba'athism to irreconcilable hostility in separated political settings. Nothing explains the irrational streak in the Iran-Iraq war better than some of these structural identities between the two protagonists.”³⁰ This irrational streak existed on both sides of the Shatt al-Arab, of course; Makiya, an Iraqi Arab and secular Shi'a, quotes Jasim Abdulghani as saying that “Persian hatred of the Arabs... is so deeply embedded in the Iranian psyche... that the Persians have forgotten almost all the various invasions except that of the Arabs.”³¹

Though the target of genuine appeals from the Iranian government during the war, most now agree that the portrait Saddam's *mukhabarat* (secret police) state painted of the Iraqi Shi'a as a vector of Persian infiltration was grossly overstated. Even at Iraq's lowest

³⁰ Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq, Updated Edition*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 108.

³¹ Makiya, 262; for the original, see Jasim Abdulghani, *Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1984).

points in the war, the Iranian surges of 1982, Shi'a Iraqis were willing to fight for the state.³² Nonetheless, the paranoid Ba'athist state apparatus increasingly deprived the southern, predominately Shi'a governorates throughout the 1980s, appointing carpet-bagging Sunni governors, effectively barring the Shi'a from the officer corps, and hoarding oil revenues and patronage for the center. Some discrimination – the exclusion of Shi'a from the Ministry of [Religious] Endowments, the banning of Shi'a rituals like the *ashura* – was explicit. Government neglect and a “well-known lack of services” in the southern Shi'a provinces may have been more incidental, the side-effect of prioritizing the central-Iraq Sunni elites, rather than seeking to actively deprive the southern Shi'a.³³ Nonetheless, whether quietist or revolutionarily inclined, Iraqi Shi'a knew where they stood relative to the state. But still, no Shi'a uprising yet, though the grievances of disenfranchisement were there.

In February of 1991, President George H. W. Bush called on Iraqis to “take matters into their own hands,” as the Iraqi military limped out of Kuwait and the western desert, defeated by Operation: Desert Storm. Many did, and “as [Saddam's] military forces fled Kuwait dissent reared its head first in the ravaged, once-proud army.”³⁴ The defection of some military units – initially in the predominately Sunni (but still southern) towns of Abu al-Khasib and Zubair – met with independent but disorganized Shi'a insurrection, leading to the secession of nine provinces south of Baghdad and the formation of ad hoc local ruling councils to replace the Ba'ath state apparatus.³⁵

³² Makiya, 256.

³³ Haddad, 58.

³⁴ Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq*, (Malden, Mass: Polity, 2007): 131.

³⁵ Stansfield, 131.

On March 3rd, 1991, the Shi'a revolted. The intifada's beginning is extremely hard to pin down. Certainly *someone* stood up to the Ba'ath, perhaps a Sunni soldier, perhaps a Shi'a mob; either way, the Shi'a *en masse* followed suit. It's not even clear that the Shi'a-ness of the intifada's first days was anything more than an accident of geography, a natural reaction of an area left comparatively poor, defeated, and run over compared to Baghdad. Like American colonists' first shots against the British in Lexington and Concord, the first shot (and its shooter) are elevated to mythic status, and the finer the level of detail, the taller the tale seems. Makiya:

A column of Iraqi tanks fleeing from Kuwait happened to roll into [Basra's] Sa'ad Square... The commander at the head of the column positioned his vehicle in front of a gigantic mural of Saddam in military uniform located next to the Ba'ath Party headquarters in the middle of the square. Standing atop his vehicle and addressing the portrait, he denounced the dictator in a blistering speech: 'What has befallen us of defeat, shame, and humiliation. Saddam, is the result of your follies, your miscalculations, and your irresponsible action!'... The commander jumped back into his tank and swiveled the gun turret to take aim at the portrait. He blasted Saddam's face away with several shells.³⁶

Basra did not fall first, though. Kufa was taken by rebels as early as March 3rd, followed by Karbala on March 5. Diwaniya, Hillah, Amarah, Nasiriyah, and Kut, and several smaller cities and towns soon followed suit.³⁷ The revolts in some cities were truly spontaneous, with civilians and religious leaders joining defecting soldiers – possibly encouraged by the calls for rebellion from President Bush and a CIA station broadcasting from Saudi Arabia.³⁸ Najaf, according to the accounts of multiple rebels,

³⁶ Makiya, xix.

³⁷ "Endless Torment: The 1991 Uprising In Iraq And Its Aftermath," *Human Rights Watch*, (1992): 22, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/36876433/Endless-Torment-The-1991-Uprising-in-Iraq-and-Its-Aftermath-Human-Rights-Watch>.

³⁸ Joel Wing, "The 1991 Shiite Uprising in Southern Iraq," *Musings on Iraq*, August 30, 2011, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2011/08/1991-shiite-uprising-in-southern-iraq.html>.

was seized by a gang of sixty young men that quickly swelled to six hundred, who stormed six Iraqi police and Ba'ath facilities, finally capturing the main police headquarters building the morning of March 4th. "They seem to have killed everyone who resisted them," Makiya, having interviewed a number of rebels, deduces, "releasing only soldiers or policemen who surrendered without a fight or who announced a switch of loyalties."³⁹ The uprising in Najaf also featured an actual instance of Iranian infiltration – or rather, the infiltration of Iran-based Iraqi Shi'a expatriates in the form of SCIRI's military wing, the Badr Brigades. The only infiltration of *actual* Iranians documented appears to be an unlucky film crew trapped in Najaf while attempting to collect B-roll footage of the one-time home of Ayatollah Khomeini.⁴⁰

The revolt in Karbala played out much the same, with Ba'ath officials captured and killed, and records destroyed. Meanwhile, in Nasiriyah, "the rebellion started in the marshes with soldiers returning from the Gulf War and local tribes. They took over the Baath party and security forces headquarters, and then moved on an army unit, taking over the area." Rebels in Diwaniya seized a tanks from an army base outside the city, and "took the provincial capital building, along with Baath and security forces offices. There too, some tribes joined in what became heavy fighting." In Hillah, the uprising stalled; like the Basra uprising would find, some of the Ba'ath forces were not so easily dislodged. There, government forces held out for the duration of the uprising, as rebels "could not overwhelm a military intelligence building, or a military base just outside of

³⁹ Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World*, (Cambridge: W. W. Norton, 1994): 67.

⁴⁰ Makiya, (1994), 94.

the city, which continued to fight against the uprising.”⁴¹ Saddam, convinced that American paratroopers were to be dropped into the country’s south, had turned police stations, schools, and government facilities into armories, apparently assuming the local citizenry would rise up against the Americans rather than him.⁴² When coalition forces instead raced through the Western desert with their decapitating ‘left hook,’ Saddam apparently forgot to reclaim all those unused weapons.

What is clear is that this was an uprising that caught Saddam off-guard. Though there were inevitably some hard-line Sunni Ba’athists perennially distrustful of the Shi’a, or cosmopolitan elites distrustful of the poor rabble of the south, Saddam is on record with his military commanders as surprised. He claims to have trusted Iraqis, and that “what happened could not be expected, and thus we were not prepared to face such a factor... I never expected that some of our people, a small number, would betray us.”⁴³ Perhaps this – presumably – genuine surprise explains the severity of the reprisals. It may also explain how easily the urban rebels were able to arm themselves: in anticipation of a southern invasion the Ba’ath had turned nearly every government building in the south into an arms depot, trusting the (mostly Shi’a) southerners to beat back the Americans.

Significantly, this was an urban rebellion; tribesmen and in particular the Marsh Arabs by and large did not, by most accounts, participate (Diwaniyah is the single exception, and hard to verify). As with so many before, this was an uprising of young, urban men, many poor. Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army, two decades later, would find

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Makiya (1994), 71.

⁴³ Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council, “Saddam Hussein and His Military Commanders,” February 1992, CRRC, SH-RVCC-D-000-610, referenced in Joseph Sassoon, “Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party,” (New York: Cambridge, 2012): 166.

this same demographic no less restive. Even for Maliki, the cities of the south, specifically Basra, would prove far more problematic than the outlying rural areas.

While the rebellion was not homogenously Shi'a in personnel, it was decidedly Shi'a in character. When the thousands-strong Badr Brigades did infiltrate the country their first act, according to eyewitnesses? "The storming of the Sheraton Hotel and the burning of the bars and casinos... They then proclaimed the establishment of a Shi'ite Islamic Republic in Basra;"⁴⁴ hardly ecumenical acts. Likewise the eventual support, tacit though it may have been, of Grand Ayatollah al-Khoei, was seen by fighters at the time as a huge victory. However, his contribution consisted solely of two fatwas, one calling on Iraqis to protect holy sites (Najaf's Tomb of Imam Ali was under threat.) The second called for a Supreme Committee to guide the rebellion – a larger-scale incorporation of the local governing councils that briefly ruled rebel-held cities.⁴⁵ However, when Najaf fell, al-Khoei was swiftly arrested, and forced to appear on national television alongside Saddam on March 19th, calling for an end to the uprising (which by then had already been largely beaten back.) The memory of al-Khoei's tepid, 11th hour embrace of the rebels, and that this did nothing to prevent Saddam from ordering his grisly executing in 1992⁴⁶ taught other Shi'a religious leaders to either take an even more measured approach (Ali al-Sistani) or go all-in, and protect themselves with a powerful militia (Muqtada al-Sadr.)

⁴⁴ Makiya, (1994), 90.

⁴⁵ See note 31, above.

⁴⁶ He was killed with a nail gun. His executioners videotaped it.

But Basra, the initiator, never truly fell. 6,000 Republican Guards remained and regrouped as the city was seized, and retook the initiative as early as March 4th. Basra was retaken by March 17th; Karbala two days later. Any Shi'a expectations of outside support were not met; the only infiltrators were Iraqi exiles, and the US, having instigated the uprising, seemed to prefer the weakened Ba'ath even *with* Saddam to a de-stabilized or radical Iraq. US policy was "to get rid of Saddam, not his regime."⁴⁷

Revenge

The *intifada* itself is, for many Shi'a, the chosen victory; what followed was the chosen trauma. Saddam's revenge was swift and direct. The nine provinces that had fallen to rebels were summarily retaken. Loyal and elite units like the Republican Guard were sent to reassert control of major cities like Basra and Karbala, and did so in a mere three days of fighting. Country-wide reprisals were an opportunity for a country-wide housecleaning for the Ba'ath, and targeted Kurds and other ethnic groups in addition to the Shi'as in order to rid the country of any still-emboldened threats to the regime.

But the Shi'a were made to know that they were being singled out. Leading the Ba'athist counterattack, Saddam's cousin and Republican Guard leader Hussein Majid al-Kamal threatened to destroy the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala, saying "my name is Hussein and so is yours. Let us see who is the strongest."⁴⁸ According to Human Rights Watch, the government began to demolish the areas around the shrines of Hussein and Abbas, which was "designed to create 'a sanitary zone of concrete' around two of the holiest shrines of the Shi'a

⁴⁷ Peter W. Galbraith, "The Ghosts of 1991," *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2003, accessed January 19^t, 2013, <http://newsmine.org/content.php?ol=war-on-terror/iraq/insurgency/civil-war/bush-called-for-1991-shiite-rebellion-against-saddam.txt>.

⁴⁸ Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revivla, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008): 72.

faith: Entire buildings flanking a central boulevard linking the two mosques had been reduced to mounds of rubble since [a London Times correspondent visiting in April 1991] had visited ten days earlier.”⁴⁹

A fervor for reprisal spread throughout Ba’ath forces in the nine provinces. On March 20, tanks rolled into Najaf with the words ‘no Shi’a after today’ written on them; napalm, cluster munitions, and as many as *thirty-five* SCUD missiles had been used against Najaf prior to their arrival, “in order to soften up the resistance.”⁵⁰ These are all three terror weapons when used against urban areas. The SCUD missile initiated the Iran-Iraq “war of the cities” phase because it had a ‘circular error probability’ of 2 miles - a no more than a 50% chance of landing within two miles of its target. Tens of thousands of Marsh Arabs were displaced as well; eventually, the US and its allies, faced with a humanitarian crisis over the displacement of refugees, established a no-fly zone south of the 32nd parallel in 1992 (extended to the 33rd in 1996). Not surprisingly, Operation: Southern Watch was designed to cover all nine of the Shi’a provinces that had revolted.

Reprisals were thorough as well as symbolic. One Iraqi officer estimates that once the Iraqi military reconstituted itself, 150,000 Shi’a were killed.⁵¹ Though this officer’s estimate was on the high end (although some court documents produced during Saddam’s trial put the number as high as 180,000) no one now disputes the existence of mass graves like al-Hillah and al-Mahawil, or the systematic and brutal nature of the reprisals.

⁴⁹ See note 37, above.

⁵⁰ Makiya, (1994), 96.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵²⁵³⁵⁴ “The aim... was to terrorize the Shi’a population of Iraq by inflicting on them a collective punishment so bloody that they would never rise again.”⁵⁵ In al-Hillah, apocryphally the site of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, 5,000 bodies were discovered.⁵⁶

The intifada of 1991 became “a chosen trauma par excellence for many Shi’as... viewed by many Iraqi Sunnis as a dark episode that was, at best, an outburst of criminally violent chaos, or, far worse, as a moment of Iranian aggression that, with the aid of Iraqi or pseudo-Iraqi elements, struck southern Iraq when the country was at its weakest.”⁵⁷ Conceptually identified by psychologist Vamik Volkan, the term ‘chosen trauma’ refers to the “shared mental representation of a massive trauma that [a] group’s ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy.”⁵⁸ Shared history like this is passed down within families, through oral tradition, within houses of worship; with chosen traumas, time is often compressed, meaning that to a Shi’a, there would be little difference in emotional salience between the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala in 680 and the martyrdom of Ayatollah al-Khoei in 1992. To Sunnis, the 1991 uprising is the chosen trauma; to Shi’a,

⁵² “Saddam’s Cousin, 14 Others on Trial for Suppressing 1991 Revolt,” *Voice of America*, November 1, 2009, accessed January 19, 2013, <http://www.voanews.com/content/a-13-2007-08-21-voa18/352409.html>.

⁵³ James Watts, *Iranian Influence in Iraqi Shi’a Groups* (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School: 2012): 22.

⁵⁴ John F. Burns, “Uncovering Iraq’s Horrors in Desert Graves,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2006, accessed October 28, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/05/world/middleeast/05grave.html?_r=1.

⁵⁵ Cockburn, 75.

⁵⁶ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), “Iraq’s Legacy of Terror: Mass Graves,” (Washington, DC: USAID, 2004), accessed October 28, 2012, http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/library/reports/2004/040317_iraq_mass_graves.pdf.

⁵⁷ Haddad, 65.

⁵⁸ Vamik Volkan, “On Chosen Trauma,” *Mind and Human Interaction*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1991): 3.

Saddam's response is. Sunni descriptions of the intifada echo Weimar German howling of a "stab in the back," betrayed by a fifth column that handed the country over to its enemies. Indeed, the state officially designated the intifada as "the page of betrayal and treason."⁵⁹ And for many Sunnis, the intifada would not be the last item the Shi'a would stab them and the country in the back. After all, Shi'a exiles in Iran and London like Ahmed Chalabi and Iyad Allawi openly called for the 2003 invasion and subsequent de-Ba'athification of the country. No surprise, then, that "the Shi'a were portrayed in Sunni polemics as having betrayed Iraq and facilitated its occupation."⁶⁰

In hindsight, the failure of Sunnis to join the intifada seems almost predetermined by geography and demography. Demoralized and frustrated Iraqi forces retreated from Kuwait to Baghdad the only logical way: through the nine predominately Shi'a provinces south of the capital. If the sight of the defeated Iraqi army was a major contributing factor to the intifada, then it follows that only those that saw it would have joined – and (mostly) only Shi'a saw it. The morale of retreating Iraqi soldiers, and southern Shi'a's faith in the state, were so low that in the first days of the intifada, "it often took no more than a dozen armed and determined young men to capture a village or a neighbourhood."⁶¹

Historiography, Iraq-Style

The discourse the Ba'athists shaped around the intifada would ultimately backfire. The Shi'a began to turn *away* from nationalism, and retreated deeper and deeper into

⁵⁹ Haddad, 119.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

their own sectarian worldview and self-identification. Not surprisingly, the crackdown did not cow Shi'a firebrands, but rather followed conflict theorist Louis Kriesberg's observation that "as conflict intensifies, shifts in the leadership can occur that enhance the influence of more intransigent persons."⁶² It is out of this milieu that Muqtada al-Sadr (Sadr III) emerged; it is this dynamic that led to increasingly, and ultimately fatally, subversive messaging from al-Khoei and aggressive actions from SCIRI leader Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim. Not surprisingly, al-Khoei was singled out to be made an example of for all Shi'a to see; his nationally-televised humiliation was not enough. In March of 1991, Najaf authorities arrested the 95-year-old and over 100 members of his family.⁶³ Members of the al-Hakim family were also targeted, the latest in a long line of imprisonments targeting them.

Sunni and Shi'a provide plenty of clear examples of constructivist and identity theorist Lene Hansen's axiom that "meaning is constructed through the discursive juxtaposition between a privileged sign on the one hand a devalued one on the other... [leading to] a conceptualization of identity in relational terms."⁶⁴ And, especially following the end of Ba'ath rule in 2003, Sunni and Shi'a alike are indeed very verbal entities.⁶⁵ The Shi'a identity Saddam delineated in order to inflict punishment throughout the 1990s came to take on a real meaning, blending in with traditional currents of martyrdom and victimhood. Identity became meaning, and meaning became action.

⁶² Kriesberg, 159.

⁶³ See note 37, above.

⁶⁴ Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

Later, during the civil war, “as Shi’as and Sunnis turned into self-proclaimed victims who portrayed themselves as uniquely under threat or exceptionally victimized, the tangible effects of the escalating violence and the hostile myths about self and other operated in a cyclical fashion, with the former offering ‘proof’ of the latter, to justify communal animosities.”⁶⁶ The resumption of the very public Shi’a *ashura* celebrations after the end of the Ba’ath is an excellent example of how publicly and actively Iraqi Shi’a were now proclaiming their identity. The passion-play aspects of *ashura* (the self-flagellation, the self-mutilation, etc.) took on a new meaning now that Shi’a were free to perform these acts – rather than having these acts performed *upon* them.

The Ba’ath became suddenly and explicitly anti-Shi’a, and at the same time became itself a party of Sunni identity. A series of editorials in the Ba’ath newspaper *Al-Thawra*, run in April 1991, labeled the rebels of 1991 “foreign by the virtue of their identity and nationality... [and] alien to Iraq by virtue of their mentality, conscience, and feelings.”⁶⁷ Scholars on Iraqi Shi’ism, though they might disagree on the extent of sectarian rivalry prior to 1991, tend to agree that this sort of anti-Shi’a rhetoric and discourse was a new phenomenon. These articles “went to great lengths to ‘prove’ that Iraq’s Shi’a were actually ‘un-Iraqi,’ and that “Iranian influence over southern Iraq... debased the culture and especially the religion of the Shi’a.”⁶⁸

With that, the Arab Shi’a became Persian, and enemies in an ethnic, rather than religious, conflict that stretched back centuries. No longer was Iraqi Ba’athism a big-tent

⁶⁶ Haddad, 184.

⁶⁷ *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution) refers to the original ouster of King Faisal, and was the original name of Baghdad’s eastern slums – they were renamed ‘Saddam City’ in the 1990s, and ‘Sadr City’ in the 2000s. Makiya, (1994), 102.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

that paid lip service to Gamal Abdel Nasser's dictum that an Arab was anyone who's mother tongue was Arabic; now, the Ba'ath made it very clear that some Arabs were more Arab than others. Ba'ath imagery began to identify openly and specifically with the culture of the Tikritis and western desert tribesmen. Specifically Sunni shariah law was written into the Iraqi penal code in 1994; cartoon punishments like cutting off the hands of thieves was now state policy. Preferential treatment and hiring continued unabated.

In fact, it was the state historiography of the intifada that essentially invented modern Iraqi sectarianism, as before it, "the terms 'Shi'a' and 'Sunni' were seldom seen in Iraqi official discourse."⁶⁹ It was in the 1990s that the regime "sought to encourage some increased [Sunni] religious devotion, so long as such sentiments were properly channeled into the activities that the regime viewed as useful."⁷⁰ The shift is remarkable; until his death in 1989, Saddam counted as a close friend the Arab Christian Michelle Aflaq, a co-founder of the original Ba'ath Party. Throughout the early years of his reign, "proven Saddam loyalists included Shi'ites, Kurds, and various sects of Christians. If Saddam believed a subordinate was a proven and committed loyalist, he did not particularly care what that person's sect or ethnicity was."⁷¹ While this might be a somewhat overly rosy picture – Saddam did not run some meritocracy, by all accounts favoring his tribesmen from Tikrit – the fact of non-Sunnis in the Ba'ath upper echelons

⁶⁹ Haddad, 119.

⁷⁰ Dr. W. Andrew Terrill, *Lessons of the Iraqi De-Ba'athification Program for Iraq's Future and the Arab Revolutions*, (U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute: Carlisle, 2012): 11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

was undeniable. Their actual roles or influence are, of course, subject to debate, as Saddam “actively reached out to secular Shi’ites to serve as ‘democratic ornaments.’”⁷²

After the intifada, the language of place also came to the fore. Iraq after the intifada was a country of two halves – there were the *muhafadhat al-ghawgha’a* (‘mob’ provinces) and the *muhafadhat al-baydha* (‘white’ provinces.)⁷³ *Shrugi*, a perjorative referring originally to Iraqis from east of the Euphrates, came to refer to all southerners from the ‘mob’ provinces; during his trial, it’s how Saddam reportedly referred to chief prosecutor Jafar al-Mussawi - “uncivilized, uneducated, and inferior.”⁷⁴ Interestingly, this binary language did not accommodate the Kurds, who had similarly revolted – but were after Operation: Desert Storm under the protection of a western no-fly zone.

When viewed as a single period of time, the past twenty years in Iraq seem to tell the story of the birth, adolescence, and maturation of Iraqi political Shi’ism. Rather than crush their spirits, Saddam’s reprisals for the intifada, though cruel, mobilized what had been until then a fairly quietist political mass movement. Saddam was a “master of words,”⁷⁵ and the power of names and language was on display throughout the Ba’ath reign. While “official ideologies of states and movements are not guides to what is in the minds of even the most loyal citizens,”⁷⁶ there appears to have been little daylight between the policies and language of Saddam and the Ba’athists. However, what seems

⁷² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷³ Haddad, 102.

⁷⁴ Michael Newton, *Enemy of the State: The Trial and Execution of Saddam Hussein* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2008): 93.

⁷⁵ Ofra Bengio, *Saddam’s Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (New York: Oxford, 1998): 12.

⁷⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1990): 10–11.

clear is that Ba'athist Iraq began to shift from a characteristically authoritarian state to a characteristically totalitarian one; now that all Shi'a were seen as possible traitors, it was far more important for Saddam and the mukhabarat to keep an eye on every conversation and build a cult of personality.

Discursive and iconographic developments like these turned what had until then been essentially incidental discrimination into hard-wired division. Throughout the 1990s, Saddam began to appear on the sides of buildings and on television in traditional, desert-style Arab garb, abandoned by the southern Shi'a generations prior but still very much identified with the conservative, Sunni tribes of the western desert. Saddam also had loyal scholars trace his lineage to the prophet and publish comparisons of the President to 'Ali, the father of Shi'ism and thus (attempt to) persuade Shi'a to follow him.⁷⁷ Not only that, but only he could claim this lineage, and the Revolutionary Command Council decreed that anyone other than Saddam claiming similar lineage would face seven years in prison.⁷⁸

All this Shi'a co-option backfired, leading Shi'a to reflexively embrace their own Shi'a identity, history, and most importantly, majority. According to one prominent Shi'a official, "in 1991 we [Shi'a] saw an increasing enthusiasm towards the crystallization of something that had long been present: the conviction that the Shi'a are the majority; that they are the primary stakeholders in Iraq; that they are the caretakers of the unit of Iraq.

⁷⁷ Sassoon, 177.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

And this goes back to [the anti-British uprising of] 1920 – they have always been devoted to Iraq.”⁷⁹ Saddam came to be referred to as ‘Tikrit’s idol.’

Putting down the intifada caused it to metastasize into a protracted social conflict between Sunni and Shi’a. Even including a brief, abortive Shi’a uprising in 1999, the scale and destructiveness of the conflict between Sunni and Shi’a remained low throughout the 1990s and up until 2003. The 1999 case - the al-Sadr intifada - demonstrates the extent to which Saddam had simultaneously crippled and enraged Shi’a Iraqis throughout the 1990s.

Violence quickly erupted in the Shi’a community after learning of the assassination of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr... The most serious of [uprising] attempts came on March 17, 1999, when a groups of armed men attacked Baathist government buildings...the uprising was coordinated among several different groups to include 168 students from the faculty of Engineering in the University of Basra, the Iraqi Hezbollah, and the Badr Corps... Badr support never arrived to assist in the attack that day. It was realized later that at the last moment Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, the leader of SCIRI who controlled the Badr organization, postponed the attack without reason...After suffering catastrophic deaths at the hands of the Saddam regime, the al-Sadr movement had no choice but to remain underground.⁸⁰

But it has to be remembered that even at this stage, the conflict was still *technically* pitting the Ba’ath vs. Shi’a rebels, rather than Sunni and Shi’a outright; but Sunni and Ba’ath were increasingly embracing one another, as both overlapped in practice and defined Shi’a as the unequivocal ‘other.’ To this end, the Ba’ath’s coercion throughout the 1990s was systematic and frequent; through the mid- and late-1990s Shi’a and specifically their clerical leadership were targeted for assassination. But these were the acts of an oppressive, totalitarian state, and while Saddam singled out specific Shi’a

⁷⁹ Haddad, 133.

⁸⁰ Watts, 32-33.

leaders to mitigate the risk of an organized Shi'a uprising, he dispatched political enemies of all other ethnicities and sects just as readily. The scope of the conflict was, in other words, narrow (though this is little consolation to the assassinated.) While the violence of the intifada was on a massive scale, the rest of the 1990s was characterized by individualized and targeted violence. So while certainly *extreme*, the violence meted out by Saddam and the Ba'ath party – the level of coercion, to use Kriesberg's terminology – was limited.⁸¹ Even in the darkest post-Ba'ath years of torture and beheadings, the level of coercion characterizing the conflict at best *marginally* escalated in gruesomeness (it's possible it even de-escalated, as it would be hard for even al-Qaeda to match the gruesome randomness of wards-of-the-state Uday and Qusay Hussein.) But the conflict very much escalated in scope.

In order to understand the sectarian divisions of the 1990s and how they've translated into the political divisions of the post-Ba'ath era, language and cultural perceptions are as important as actions. Identities changed, and the sort of passive sectarianism that adapted to Iraqi national peculiarities and traditions, and buttressed a national identity, was gone. After Saddam's expulsion from Kuwait, Makiya argues, Iraqis no longer feared Saddam or his secret police, and "had to be encouraged to fear one another. Virtually from the day the cease-fire in the Gulf War came into effect, Saddam Hussein switched to a policy of promoting sectarianism between Shi'as and Sunnis in Iraq."⁸² *The New Yorker's* George Packer, quoting Iraqi Kurd Samir Shakir Sumaidaie, sums up the situation thusly:

⁸¹ According to Kriesberg, conflicts escalate either in level of coercion, or number of people killed, and scope, referring to growth in the number of people engaged in a struggle or impacted by it. Kriesberg, 155.

⁸² Makiya, (1998), xxxi

There is no Iraqi identity that I can push my people to today. I want to have an Iraqi identity, but it does not exist... To get away from what Saddam did, where ethnic identity is what mattered most, to a society where citizenship is what matters—that transition is not an easy transition.⁸³

Packer's ominous conclusion is that "the obsession with ethnic identity may be the ultimate legacy of Saddam's rule, his diabolical revenge on his countrymen."⁸⁴ Though it is not the Sunni-Shi'a conflict threatening Suamidaie's Kirkuk, there are clear parallels in his comments. A different paper would present a comparative study of the Kurdish and Sunni-Shi'a conflicts which, to many of their victims or combatants, would hardly feel different at all. If anything the Kurdish conflict has deeper roots, and better entertains "primordialist" explanations that the Sunni-Shi'a conflict simply doesn't. Sunni and Shi'a as categories dividing Iraqi Arabs are relatively new even within the Islamic timescale, but tensions between lowland and highland go back millennia and appear nearly everywhere on the globe. The key similarity, however, is that both of these conflicts were deliberately inflamed by Saddam. The key difference is that the Sunni-Shi'a conflict was not only inflamed, but largely *created* by Saddam.

In the sanctions-era 1990s, zero-sum politics were a reality, as the Ba'ath apparatus found itself the sole allocator of scarce resources under the oil-for-food agreement and in the face of anemic trade floes.⁸⁵ "Great inequality in power, insofar as it is regarded as

⁸³ George Packer, "The Next Iraqi War," *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2004, accessed online November, 20, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/10/04/041004fa_fact.

⁸⁴ See note 73, above.

⁸⁵ The Ba'ath and Saddam were indeed quite happy with this position, as they were more effectively able to reward and punish with state largesse, in the absence of a free market. This was a tragic, unintended consequence of US policy.

illegitimate, tends to become a grievance,”⁸⁶ and increasingly throughout the 1990s, Saddam re-engineered the Ba’ath party as a means of centralizing control over the entire economy. The statist economy and sanctions had “undermined foreign investment... and retarded private sector development... A non-Ba’athist primary school teacher would usually be paid the equivalent of U.S. \$4 per month, while a Ba’athist in the same position, doing the same work, would be paid around \$200 per month.”⁸⁷

Discussing the bases of conflict, Kriesberg asserts that “a society undergoing disorienting rapid change or a deterioration of living standards tends to produce feelings of frustration in many society members,” creating a situation in which groups see a utility “in proclaiming a great external threat, and perhaps even in provoking it to enhance their status, power, and control over resources.”⁸⁸ Discussing similar drivers applied specifically to Iraq, Nathan Gonzalez identifies “the three catalysts of sectarian violence, (1) the power of charismatic leaders, (2) the breakdown of state authority, and (3) the geopolitical battles of larger nations.”⁸⁹ For a brief period after Saddam’s expulsion from Kuwait, these conditions were all met, leading to the intifada; however, Saddam managed to get this genie back in the bottle throughout the 1990s.⁹⁰ And then, suddenly, there was no more Ba’ath party, no more Saddam. George Packer quotes one Iraqi as saying, “Saddam is gone, but we’re not through with him... Even if he’s not here, it’s like he

⁸⁶ Kriesberg, 37.

⁸⁷ Terill, 21. See note 43.

⁸⁸ Kriesberg, 33-34.

⁸⁹ Gonzalez, 14.

⁹⁰ Although calling al-Khoei and his role in the intifada “charismatic” is a stretch, there was still the Ayatollah to the east, and a powerful living memory of Sadr I.

planted problems for the future.”⁹¹ And this is certainly true – the thesis of this paper is that his actions in 1991 put Iraq on a path towards civil war. However, the likelihood of this happening within an authoritarian (and throughout the 1990s, an increasingly totalitarian) state was low – witness the total failure of the al-Sadr Intifada in 1999. The sectarian divide that the Ba’ath had created and then institutionalized lead to the type of protracted social conflict that could smolder and pop indefinitely, yet starved of oxygen by the regime could never fully ignite. The end of the Ba’ath in 2003 was in that sense a breath of fresh air. So why then not just nip the burgeoning conflict in the bud? Create a “soft” partition that separates ‘ancient enemies’ before they start going after one another?

Federalism and its Discontents

Returning to Senator Biden’s soft partition: to an American electorate at that time desperate for a new approach to Iraq, it was an exciting and fresh idea. Federalism, as advocated by exiles like Makiya, could bolster minority rights and “reduce incentives for conflict by giving minority groups and their leaders more power with respect to fundamental concerns such as education, taxation, and law and order.”⁹² Makiya, like many of the members of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) was all the more persuasive for presenting himself as a secularist. And while Iraq’s eighteen governorates provided a logical administrative framework, the apportionment of power and control could have been granted territorially or along ethnic lines. The point of a federal Iraq would have

⁹¹ See note 84, above.

⁹² Daniel Byman, “Constructing a Democracy in Iraq,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003): 55.

been to prevent one group from imposing its will on all the other groups.⁹³ The goal is to rearrange “relations between the central state and subnational communities,” and allow for “ethnically distinct groups to control their own provinces... with dispersion of power [federalism reduces] the fear of domination by one group in an ethnically diverse country.”⁹⁴ This is--in theory--an ideal solution for a country with a majority seemingly eager to politically emasculate the once-powerful minority.

Lebanese historian and Professor Habib Malik believes the Lebanese model might offer some guidance for Iraq. Iraq’s potential oil wealth seems predicated upon a successful power-sharing agreement; desire for this wealth, it follows, will drive the necessary compromises. Regarding Iraq, he acknowledges that “naming Islam as the state religion in the new constitution might seem unavoidable in Iraq, but for this very reason balancing language that stresses respect for all sects and for the principle of religious liberty and personal freedom will be vital. As with Lebanon, a constitution centered on the religious denominations will serve as a guarantor of, not a hindrance to, any emerging homespun Iraqi democracy.”⁹⁵

However Hilterman, et al note that “the word federalism remains one of the most charged in the Iraqi political lexicon.”⁹⁶ In Iraq, the constitution assumes that federalism – if fully implemented - is to be “symmetrical, meaning that levels of autonomy should

⁹³ Byman, 56.

⁹⁴ Ho-Won Jeong, *Peacebuilding in Postconflict Societies: Strategy and Process*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005): 98-99.

⁹⁵ Habib Malik, “Federalism in Iraq and Lebanon,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, February 15, 2009, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=21509/>.

⁹⁶ Joost Hiltermann, Sean Kane, and Raad Al-Kadiri, “Iraq’s Federalism Quandary,” *The National Interest*, February 28, 2012, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/op-eds/hiltermann-iraqs-federalism-quandary.aspx>.

be equivalent for all regional governments;” a ‘soft partition,’ in the US lexicon.⁹⁷ ISCI had long been at the forefront of the debate, arguing for decentralization and federalism, allying with the KRG to this end. However, many Shi’a balked at this. And while they had little impact on the drafting of the 2005 constitution, fractured as they were at the time, in hindsight they seem to have been expressing the popular majority. In a poll released in 2009 72% of Iraqis opposed federalism.⁹⁸ Note that this was a poll based largely on 2008 data, collected in the shadow of a waning sectarian civil war, when perhaps federalism would have been at its most appealing to the man-on-the-street; “get me away from my neighbor!” But to the majority of Iraqis, “a democratic, federal Iraq would risk chaos and warlordism.”⁹⁹ The belief in a unified Iraqi state inexplicably endures.

But while federalism was not *officially* put into action, this is precisely the order that emerged in the post-invasion security vacuum. In the absence of a nationally-provided security, two separate, *sectarian* security situations evolved; one in the north, defined by the relationship Kurds and Arab Sunnis, and another in the center/south, defined by the relationship between Arab Shi’a and Arab Sunni. Administrative and governmental priorities at the local and national level respond almost exclusively to these two contentious relationships. The US exacerbated and in some ways supported a *de facto* federalism, as the US “chose as their allies the most sectarian of the parties... ISCI, led

⁹⁷ Joost Hiltermann, Sean Kane, and Raad Al-Kadiri, “Iraq’s Federalism Quandary,” *The National Interest*, February 28, 2012, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/op-eds/hiltermann-iraqs-federalism-quandary.aspx>.

⁹⁸ Joel Wing, “New Iraqi Opinion Poll on Preferences and Federalism Before Provincial Elections,” *Musings on Iraq*, January 24, 2009, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/01/new-iraqi-opinion-poll-on-preferences.html>.

⁹⁹ Byman, 63.

by the al-Hakim family, and the two established Kurdish parties, along with the prime minister's (Shi'a) Da'wa¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the "consistent U.S. identification of the resistance as 'Sunni' and the new government as 'Shi'a and Kurdish' ultimately created... tensions: power, wealth, and favors flowed to the latter two, while the first was harshly repressed."¹⁰¹

In hindsight, the plan for an *official* federalism seems unlikely to have worked. Turkish objections to an internationally-recognized federal order (which might encourage a Kurdish state), disputes over divisions of oil revenues, and the wild card of the Arab Spring that would likely have challenged federal Iraq in some substantive way. Better to leave room for fluidity and debate. But the idea that partition was the key to peace, that a proper division of the spoils was the wisest way to let air out of the balloon of civil war is ridiculous, for a very simple reasons: Saddam had spent the past two decades exacerbating sectarianism (if not creating it outright) and had hard-wired core grievances into Shi'a identity. Simply reorganizing the administration of the Iraqi government, or devolving power to localities, would not have stopped this – as Sunni and Shi'a lived side-by-side.

General political theory does not adequately account for the challenge of re-making the Iraqi state apparatus. "A federal system faces difficulty in ending communal security concerns or cracking down on bellicose elites because the central government is too weak. At its heart, federalism strengthens local communities at the expense of the

¹⁰⁰ Muttitt, 324.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

national government.”¹⁰² Ironically, federalism could have increased the likelihood of sectarian conflict; while a federal power structure might have prevented any one sect from dominating all the others as had been the case in the Ba’ath era, the devolution of power from a national and thus supra-sectarian center would by necessity lead to the empowerment of ethnic, sectarian, or territorial identities. “Power-sharing systems that allow local groups to have their own schools and religious institutions also magnify the salience of communal identity, making it harder to create cross-cutting ties or build a shared identity.”¹⁰³ Additionally, a weak center would have had a difficult time keeping arms out of the hands of non-state groups; with the army disbanded, this would have been a critical concern.¹⁰⁴

The weakness of the Iraqi state post-2003 left a security vacuum that forced Sunni and Shi’a alike to strike first, and as a result the coalition government of Iraq even today is a coalition not of rivals, but sworn enemies, beholden to battle-ready enemy constituencies. Political thinking of this sort is evident in the actions and statements of Anbari tribesmen, Salafist insurgents, and even the so-called Ba’athist “dead-enders,” those few unreconstructed Saddamists now believed to have indeed played a key role early on in the insurgency (the post-2003 grievances of the Sunni will be discussed at length in Section Four: The Awakening).

But these fears were not limited to the Sunnis, as the Shi’a have, as a whole, acted manic and desperate despite the great power they now wield, fearful of assimilation and extermination (ironically less likely than ever to occur). The Shi’a chosen trauma of the

¹⁰² Byman, 56.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

intifada and their subsequent punishment became so core to Iraqi Shi'a identity that no day without the Ba'athists in power was to be taken for granted. An assertive Shi'a sectarian identity in large part midwived by Ba'ath policies turned into an extremely aggressive sectarian identity as bêtes noir such as Zarqawi emerged. Even Operation: Knights' Charge, which pitted Maliki's Shi'a government against the restive Shi'a underclass of Basra, can be seen in this context as a rearguard action, an attempt by Maliki to settle intra-Shi'a rivalry and ensure a united front against the Zarqawis of the world. Maliki may be drifting towards authoritarianism, as many contemporary observers have suggested since his confrontation with Tariq al-Hashemi (discussed at length later); the authoritarianism he is seeking to impose upon his own Shi'a constituency, however, is truly revolutionary. The past century of Shi'a history in Iraq is one of no single Shi'a *mujtahid* speaking for the entirety of Iraq's Arab Shi'a. Based on his actions, Maliki seems to be coveting that sort of whole-community legitimacy.

Transformation

Ironically, after themselves taking power in 2005, the Shi'a found themselves forced to tamp down the sectarianism that had become the core of their identity. According to Haddad, two of the most highly charged words in today's Iraqi political discourse are *shu'ubi* and *ta'ifi*.¹⁰⁵ *Shu'ubiyah* itself is a loaded word within the region, referring to the privileged role of Arabs within the Muslim world; to be a *shu'ubi* is to rekindle this centuries-old fire, inflame passions, and divide Iraqis. It is language that Shi'a politicians use to label other Shi'a as "extreme" and, without saying so explicitly,

¹⁰⁵ Haddad, 44.

Persian. Similarly, *ta'ifis* (sectarians) are always the real enemy, “so abhorrent is the spectre of division within the nation-state [of Iraq].”¹⁰⁶

Nonetheless, the case of Saaoun Hammadi is worth examining. A Ba’athist *and* a Shi’a, Hammadi served as Foreign Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Prime Minister, and ultimately as Saddam’s last Speaker of the Assembly – the highest-ranking Shi’a within the regime. Hammadi, like many other secular, “establishment Shi’a”, was presented with the Faustian bargain of “being co-opted and in return gaining a few crumbs of power for himself and some economy assistance for his Shi’ite supporters,”¹⁰⁷ an offer many Shi’a had no choice *but* to take. Not surprisingly, following the fall of the Ba’ath party, Shi’a like Hammadi (who died in exile in 2007) were presented a different deal with the devil by the new Shi’a government and de-Ba’athification commissions, “which allowed Shi’ite Ba’ath party members to repent and keep their obs. In doing so, the former Ba’athists became subservient to the parties that allowed them to remain in their positions and vulnerable to pressure from these parties so long as they remained a relevant political force.”¹⁰⁸ This was the price of survival.

The effects of the security vacuum in Iraq post-2003 have been well-studied; a security vacuum has specific characteristics, all evident in Iraq. To political scientists, this was not at all anomalous behavior. What *is* anomalous, or at the very least well-studied, is how the respective political traumas of Iraq’s Sunnis and Shi’a have infiltrated the day-to-day politics of the country. De-Ba’athification is an excellent microcosm of sectarian confrontation.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁰⁷ Terill, 31.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

Iraq had been liberated and turned into a democracy of sorts; at the very least, it now had a vibrant public forum unprecedented under the Ba'ath. Though political reprisals were a reality, the plurality of voices was now deafening. But the tragedy of democratization is that securitization and the institutionalization of democratic norms do not always keep pace with it; it encourages invective just as surely as accountability. Daniel Byman identifies one of the many risks of democratization as the ability it grants “elites [to] easily manipulate democratic freedoms, particularly when democratic institutions are weak... Chauvinists in almost every country, if freed from authoritarian constraints, exploit the media and the right to assemble freely, using these opportunities to mobilize their followers. Indeed, a necessary condition for elite competition – the political space to express views and mobilize followers – is created by democratization.”¹⁰⁹ The democratic peace theory of international relations posits that democratic states are less likely to go to war because of democratic bulwarks like slow mobilization and freedom of information,¹¹⁰ but many scholars apply caveats to transitioning democracies (like Iraq). Transitioning democracies may be *more* likely to go to war, as the institutionalization of liberal norms is outpaced by elites’ needs to provide security to their constituency. Democratic peace theorist *par excellence* Edward Mansfield identifies succinctly a process in which “elites exploit their power in the imperfect institutions of partial democracies to create *faits accomplis*, control political agendas, and shape the content of information media in ways that promote belligerent

¹⁰⁹ Byman, 59.

¹¹⁰ Sebastian Rosato, “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (Nov., 2003): 587, accessed online January 21, 2013, <http://rrii.150m.com/t08/Sebastian%20Rosato%20-%20The%20Flawed%20Logic%20of%20Democratic%20Peace%20Theory.pdf>.

pressure-group lobbies or upwellings of militancy in the populace as a whole.”¹¹¹

Because this sort of elite behavior is a consequence of weak authority, finding evidence of it *within* Iraq is easy.

It was not hard to see that newly-free elites would use de-Ba’athification to seek power and weaken enemies under this new system. King Abdullah II of Jordan was blunt: “I said I hoped he [Bremer] understood that if he was going to de-Baathify across the board, he would be setting himself up for major resistance and would create a power vacuum that someone would have to fill.”¹¹² The reason for King Abdullah’s objection was not one of political theory; rather, he knew that membership of the Iraqi Ba’ath party – while predominately Sunni, especially at the higher levels – was a requirement to anyone seeking a living wage.

It is hard to imagine that the US occupation would not have developed and implemented some form of de-Ba’athification on its own; but it is significant that the idea’s author was the exiled secular Shi’a Ahmad Chalabi. MIT and University of Chicago-educated, Chalabi was skilled in building patronage networks and manipulating Western policymakers after years in the US, UK, Jordan and Lebanon. Chalabi cleverly played on historical pride with statements like, “Iraq needs a comprehensive program of de-Ba’athification even more extensive than the de-Nazification effort in Germany after World War II.”¹¹³ At once stroking American and British egos for having been so measured and magnanimous in their occupation of Germany, he dared them to go even

¹¹¹ Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer, 1995), accessed January 21, 2013, <http://www.polsci.wvu.edu/faculty/hauser/PS368/MansfieldSnyderDemocDangerWarIS1995.pdf>.

¹¹² Terrill, 1.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

further, as if to say, “you brought honor upon your countries in Germany, but can you handle the even *greater* challenge of *Iraq*?” There also seems to be, at least in hindsight, a wink and a nudge: “look how good Germany turned out after you de-Nazified it... Iraq could be even better!” The self-marketer even snuck into President Bush’s 2004 state of the union – by adding himself to the entourage of Adnan Pachachi, at that time the president of the interim Iraqi Governing Council (IGC).

But Chalabi was not the committed secular democrat that the West was eager to see take root in Iraq. A con man *par excellence*, Chalabi allied with the Iran-backed Shi’a parties of Dawa and SCIRI in 2005. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, Chalabi’s ideological compatriot Iyad Allawi would demonstrate similar flexibility when he formed an electoral bloc with the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue and the Renewal List, parties headed by vociferous Sunni enemies of Nouri al-Maliki. For Iraqi Shi’a, electoral politics are hardly any less divided and opportunistic than the religious politics. A defining characteristic of the Iraqi exile community that took power after the Ba’ath fell was this Machiavellian streak, this willingness to flex and bend in their own rhetoric and platforms and ally with elites who would never flex and bend in theirs.

Not surprisingly, the targets of Chalabi’s de-Ba’athification were predominately Sunni. “It did not escape Sunni Arab attention that the primary Iraqi champions of deep de-Ba’athification were formerly exiled Shi’ite politicians such as Ahmad Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress and Abdul Azziz Hakim of SCIRI. Many Sunni Iraqi Arabs considered “de-Ba’athification” to be synonymous with “de-Sunnization,” a strong and deliberate effort to marginalize the role of the Sunni Arab community in Iraq’s political

future.”¹¹⁴ However, the existence of high-level, Shi’a Ba’athists like Saaoun Hammadi for a truly objective de-Ba’athification committee to target should not be discounted. The law calls for the removal from public office – an expansive designation in Iraq, because it includes university professors and schoolteachers – found to have been a member of the Ba’ath security services or a branch-level or senior leadership figure.¹¹⁵ Certainly, like Hammadi, Shi’a reached these levels. Then why not make an example of a few of the more onerous Shi’a traitors, those collaborators that sold out their co-religionists to the Ba’ath throughout the 1990s? Because, at least to Maliki, the goal of a united Shi’a front is more important than symbolic gestures to Sunnis,¹¹⁶ and because Shi’as offered immunity from prosecution (and protection from extra-legal justice) in exchange for their loyalty are far more valuable to the committee and the Dawa party.

The de-Ba’athification commission (rebranded as the Justice and Accountability Commission) continues to exist, nearly a decade after the formal de-Ba’athification order of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The commission seems to be maintained by the government as a sort of ace-in-the-hole, a star chamber that can deploy still-heated anti-Ba’ath rhetoric against the Sunni enemies of the government. Its recent executive

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹⁵ Ali Abdel Sadah, “Maliki Makes Concessions on De-Baathification,” *Al-Monitor*, January 18, 2013, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/maliki-quell-unrest-concessions.html>.

¹¹⁶ The closer analysis of Operation: Knight’s Charge - and Maliki’s efforts to close Shi’a ranks by bringing Basra under control and bringing Muqtada al-Sadr to heel - will further examine this conclusion.

director was Ali Faisal al-Lami, believed by US military leadership to have been aligned with Iranian special groups.¹¹⁷¹¹⁸ Al-Lami was assassinated in May 2011.

But de-Ba'athification was not just revenge; in many cases it was a pre-emptive strike. "Destroying the political viability of the Sunni leadership in Iraq helped to move [Shi'a] toward [power]." Shi'a such as Abdulaziz Hakim were eager to support democracy "so long as his organization and sect benefited from that democracy," and in turn move Iraq towards Iraq towards a state in which "in contrast to [its] first eight decades of existence, Shi'ites would hold the important positions, and Sunnis would be politically marginalized."¹¹⁹¹²⁰ One is hard-pressed to blame the Shi'a for seeking power in order to protect themselves; as the philosopher Edmund Burke once said, it is "better to be despised for too anxious apprehensions than ruined by too confident a security."

Maliki as well has at times targeted the armed forces, the Central Bank, the electoral commission, the integrity commission, the judiciary - what Michael Knights calls a "culture of direct control."¹²¹ The recent targeting of Finance Minister Rafi al-Isawwi's bodyguards for arrest is, in this light, "an intimidation tactic" sending a message to Isawwi – that what happened to Tariq al-Hashemi could happen to him. Hashemi is Maliki's *former* Vice President; Maliki issued a warrant for his arrest reportedly as soon

¹¹⁷ Eli Lake, "U.S. general: 2 Iraqi election officials linked to Iran," *The Washington Times*, February 17, 2010, accessed January 17, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/feb/17/us-general-2-iraqi-election-chiefs-linked-to-iran/?page=all>.

¹¹⁸ Ali Faisal al-Lami, "My Testimony on 'Enhanced Interrogation Techniques,'" *The Huffington Post*, September 29, 2009, accessed January 17, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ali-faisal-allami/my-testimony-on-enhanced_b_302885.html.

¹¹⁹ Terill, 17, note 27.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹²¹ Robert Tollast, "Iraq in 2013: A Discussion With Joel Wing," *Global Politics*, December 29, 2012, accessed January 21, 2013, http://global-politics.co.uk/blog/2012/12/29/Iraq_2013_rt/.

as the final withdrawal of US forces was negotiated in 2011.¹²² Maliki the no-holds-barred partisan will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Four: Operation: Knights' Charge.

There is no monocausal explanation for the 2006-7 civil war, as much as the February 2006 bombing of Samarra's al-Askariyya mosque announced its inception to the outside world and is often seen as the "last straw" for quietist Shi'a. For decades, and most vividly since the intifada Sunni and Shi'a had engaged in an "obsessive competition"¹²³ within Iraq; the discourse makes clear that while civil war only erupted in full after the invasion, the drawing of the battle lines, through the intertextual creation of identity and oppositional discourse, had been occurring since the intifada. Saying that the civil war was *caused* by sectarianism is oversimplification, failing to account for several massive intervening factors such as the US invasion, the end of decades of one-party rule, regional machinations, and terrorist groups (foreign *and* local) deliberately provoking sectarianism for cynical reasons. But it certainly wouldn't have happened without sectarianism. And it was undeniably a sectarian civil war.

Sunni and Shi'a began to develop competing visions of victimhood and martyrdom, and parallel and divergent historical narratives that explained recent events and the others' motivations; Sunnis dismissed "Shi'a victimhood in a reflection of a genuinely divergent memory of the Ba'ath era and in an attempt to undermine Shi'a

¹²² Mohammad Ahmad, "Hashemi: I Expect a Popular Uprising Against Maliki," *Al-Monitor*, April 19, 2012, accessed January 21, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/12/hashemi-i-expect-a-popular-uprising-against-maliki.html>.

¹²³ Haddad, 175.

claims to exceptional”¹²⁴ while Shi’a discourse responded to this dismissal by further disengaging from non-sectarian nationalism, which the Sunnis then responded to, and so on, and so on. As a result, Iraq has never been far from the brink; at a 2012 National Security Council meeting on Iraq, one commentator describes a perpetual anxiety, “the sense of urgency was palpable. The director of national intelligence described the deterioration of security in Baghdad and Basra; the Iraqi Army was near collapse, he said, and another explosion of sectarian violence was imminent.”¹²⁵ In reality, the level of conflict in the country – the state of war or peace – depends on much larger trends that the US has only occasionally been able to take advantage of. And the fount of all these trends was the intifada, which, Haddad concludes, “increased [the] salience of sectarian identity... the 1990s and the memory of 1991 served to polarize sectarian relations in Iraq perhaps to an unprecedented level in Iraqi history.”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹²⁵ George Packer, “Alternative Realities,” *The New Yorker*, October 30, 2006, accessed November 20, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/10/30/061030ta_talk_packer.

¹²⁶ Haddad, 13.

Section Three: The Awakening

“I need one hundred rifles, some ammunition, and for us to turn a new page.” – Sheikh Abdel Jabar Abu-Risha¹²⁷

The US could not have asked for a better enemy in Iraq than Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi led the most nihilistic wing of the al-Qaeda franchise, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and in the pantheon of individuals responsible for the civil war, he is second only to Saddam. But whereas to Saddam, it was an unintended consequence, to Zarqawi, it was the desired effect. He is thought to have been upbraided by Osama bin Laden himself, and al-Qaeda’s senior leadership, for criticizing their focus on the US, and for himself focusing too much on targeting the Shi’a. His anti-Shi’a credentials run deep; his second wife is reported to have been the daughter of the Palestinian triggerman responsible for the murder of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim.¹²⁸ That the murder is widely accepted to have been ordered by a Shi’a – Muqtada al-Sadr – speaks to the strange bedfellows Iraqi militants have made in the past.

Zarqawi also sought, as al-Qaeda and its affiliates always have, to portray the Western invaders as *illegimate* and *other*, even when they (al-Qaeda) were foreigners in that same land. This was a tried and true strategy, as “interventions lacking broad international consensus often contribute to prolonging conflicts destructively... [Allowing insurgents to] portray their actions in ways intended to gain supporters and dissuade parties not yet engaged in the conflict from supporting their adversaries... even violent terrorist actions are often clothed in attempts at justifications and persuasive

¹²⁷ Sam Collins, “Iraq’s militia leaders reveal why they turned on al-Qaeda,” *BBC News*, September 29, 2010, accessed March 31, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11417211>. Specific quotation taken from Collins’ *Secret Iraq* documentary referred to in the article, “Awakening.” Sheikh Abdul Jabbar Abu-Risha is the brother of the assassinated Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu-Risha.

¹²⁸ Note that Hakim was stabbed, not shot. Loretta Napoleoni, “The Myth of Zarqawi,” *Time*, November 11, 2005.

appeals.”¹²⁹ But he also introduced beheadings to Iraq, and was only the latest in a long line of overly austere foreigners (he was a Jordanian) to wear out his welcome amongst local tribesman.

Zarqawi, AQI, and the Awakening are all strictly Sunni phenomena, but they each play a major role in transitioning Iraq out of its Ba’athist sectarian phase. The Ba’ath phase of Iraqi sectarianism, begun in earnest with the 1991 intifada and progressing throughout the nineties, does not end when the Ba’ath fall from power. The dynamics of oppressor and oppressed, majority and minority *do* flip, but the nature of the rift and the two sects’ grievances with one another remain the same. In other words, Iraqi Shi’a grievances with their Sunni counterparts grew incrementally throughout the 1990s, but remained in the immediate post-Ba’ath period preceding the formation of the government. Zarqawi, AQI and the civil war all greatly expanded both the scope and level of conflict; in this sense, it is really Zarqawi that ushers in the next phase of the sectarian conflict.¹³⁰ It is the success of the Awakening (and Operation: Knights’ Charge, to be covered in the following chapter) that usher in the third and current phase.

To an outside observer, perhaps, it was then no surprise when the Bani Hassan disowned Zarqawi (his sub-tribe, the al-Khalayleh clan, had denounced him weeks earlier.)¹³¹ Sick of being associated with the depravity and criminality of Zarqawi, hundreds of elders from his tribe took out an ad in a prominent Jordanian paper, and

¹²⁹ Kriesberg, 169.

¹³⁰ Again: according to Kriesberg, conflicts escalate either in level of coercion, or number of people killed, and scope, referring to growth in the number of people engaged in a struggle or impacted by it. Kriesberg, 155.

¹³¹ The Associated Press, “Al-Zarqawi’s Clan Disowns Leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq,” *USA Today*, November 11, 2005, accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2005-11-29-zarqawi_x.htm.

washed their hands of his actions – especially in the communally-oriented cultures of Arab tribesmen, there are few more damning acts. Because the Bani Hassan took out their ad in Jordanian newspapers, and specifically pledged fidelity to the Jordanian crown, it's likely that their distaste with Zarqawi had more to do with the mayhem he caused in Jordan than in Iraq.¹³² And yet, the 300 tribal elders that lent their names to this denouncement must have surely known that their move would have been viewed in the context of an American occupation next door; surely they knew that many extremists would see the disavowal of Zarqawi and loyalty to King Abdullah II as tantamount to an endorsement of the American invasion. They were not so much interested in geopolitics or the US' war on terror; rather, they were acting strategically, in the interest of keeping their kinsmen safe from extremist recruitment and government reprisal. Even if you believed conspiracy theories that the document was actually assembled by Jordanian intelligence, the lives of these signatories were now on the line. They did not retract their statement.

Sunni tribesmen living in fear of Zarqawi in Iraq, however, could not be quite so public in their denunciations. They would, however, push back against AQI for years before Gen. David Petraeus and the US finally arrived with a concerted strategy for supporting this 'awakening.' Surveying the situation of al-Zarqawi, the Jamestown Foundation describes the Jordanian sheikhs' letter as "a serious blow to al-Zarqawi—who had boasted about his family's influence in Jordan" and one that triggered a row between

¹³² Mohammad Ahmad, "Al-Zarqawi's Legacy Haunts the Al-Khalayleh Clan," Terrorism Focus Vol. 3, no. 23 (The Jamestown Foundation, 2006).

supporters and detractors and temporarily at least fractured AQI.¹³³ The Bani Hasan had apparently been able to deal a body blow to AQI without firing a shot.

History

Anbar is Iraq's largest and most sparsely populated governorate, and also one of its most traditionally 'Arab.' A vast desert that blends into Jordan in the West and Syria in the North, Anbar is riveted to the rest of Iraq by cities like Tall Afar, Fallujah, and Ramadi, forming the "Sunni Triangle," at one time the worst place in Iraq to be for an American. All three cities were the sites of fierce American sieges. In 2004, Fallujah was the site of an infamous lynching of four US contractors. In response, an incensed President George W. Bush called for the city's recapture, initiating Operation: Phantom Fury - what Tom Ricks called the US' heaviest urban fighting since Vietnam.¹³⁴ One US Marine serving there in fairly-quiet 2011 euphemistically referred to it as an 'interesting' city, that he was "lucky to leave alive."¹³⁵ Ramadi, on the other hand, was called "lost" by the architect of Fallujah's siege; AQI was considered so entrenched that US forces could only advance into the city's eastern half under the cover an AC-130 "Spectre" gunship raining five-inch artillery shells on insurgent-held blocks. Ramadi's one-time governor, Maamoun Sami Rashid al-Awani, evaded more than thirty attempts on his

¹³³ See note 3, above.

¹³⁴ Tom Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003-2005*, (New York: Penguin, 2007): 399.

¹³⁵ Capt. Jeffrey Castiglione, US Marine Corps, interview with author, February 9, 2013. Capt. Castiglione was deployed to Fallujah and points west with the 3rd battalion, 24th Marines on a police- and security forces-training mission.

life.¹³⁶ One Lt. Col. described the residents of Ramadis as “the most unhappy and hate-filled people I’ve ever seen.”¹³⁷

That the Anbaris would resent the US more than any other group makes sense. The Anbari Sunnis had lived their lives largely unperturbed by the upheaval of the past decade and a half. They were only ever the beneficiaries of the state’s largesse, and never the victims of its coercive means. Saddam’s Sunnization policies of the mid-1990s meant that their lifestyle became the example to which the Ba’ath and other Iraqis were to aspire, but at the same time they were hardly forced to cooperate with the state against their will. Sociologically, a polity like the Anbari Sunnis would have been quite pleased with their role in society, as “groups derive prestige and self respect from the harmony between their norms and those which achieve dominance in the society.”¹³⁸

The fairly homogenous population – the Dulaimi dominate the area, and are thought to be Iraq’s largest tribe – was barely touched by sectarian violence; there was only one sect, after all. As with most of the desert tribes in the region, the Dulaimis and others in Anbar were content enough to be left alone. Only Zarqawi’s arrival – and specifically his welcome of foreign fighters - would show them how much they benefitted from the Ba’ath security umbrella, and how vulnerable they were to outside forces in the post-Ba’ath security vacuum.

Zarqawi and AQI appeared in Anbar immediately following the fall of the Ba’ath, launching the insurgency in Anbar from Fallujah and Ramadi. Despite Zarqawi’s long-

¹³⁶ Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter, 2009): 65.

¹³⁷ Lt. Col. Michael Silverman, US Army, *Awakening Victory: How Iraqi Tribes and American Troops Reclaimed al Anbar Province and Defeated al Qaeda in Iraq* (Havertown: Casemate, 2011): 114.

¹³⁸ Haddad, 18.

standing relationship with al-Qaeda's central leadership – having fought in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and returned to fight the 2001 invasion – Zarqawi and the insurgent groups of Anbar were, at first, independent of al-Qaeda. The US-led siege of Fallujah in 2004 would on the one hand drive Zarqawi and much of the insurgent network (temporarily) out, but on the other hand would result in the organizational consolidation that culminated in several discrete Sunni insurgent groups merging into one and swearing *bayat* (pledging allegiance) to bin Laden and al-Qaeda in late 2004. Zarqawi and much of AQI's senior leadership would resettle in Baqubah, Diyala province – not far from Fallujah, but more importantly within operational reach of Baghdad. However, much of the insurgent network Zarqawi commanded settled west, in Ramadi and in less urban areas of Anbar.¹³⁹

By late 2005, cracks in the Sunni-dominated Iraqi insurgency had appeared. There were savvy political strategists within the field; AQI was actually the military wing of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), in a setup not unlike the relationship between Sinn Fein and the Provisional Irish Republican Army at the height of Ireland's troubles. This political "umbrella" or shadow government provided religious legitimacy, public relations, and fundraising (largely via extortion) services for AQI. Nonetheless, the foreign-ness and harsh Salafism of AQI would turn Sunni tribesmen away in droves, increasingly rival and criminal fiefdoms in cities like Mosul drove locals to cooperate with American forces. In contrast to AQI/ISI, the former Ba'athist Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri re-purposed his Ba'ath credentials and a little-recognized Sufi strain of Iraqi Sunnism into the Army of the Men of the Naqshabandi Order (AMNO), an insurgent group largely operating in the country's

¹³⁹ The road network connecting Baqubah, Baghdad, Ramadi, and Fallujah is some of the best and densest in the country. Ramadi and Fallujah both lie on the extreme east of the Anbar desert. Kagan, 63.

north. The AMNO were opportunists, and in 2006, according to the West Point Center for Combating Terrorism, “insurgent movements led by Iraqi Salafists [specifically AMNO] clashed with AQI and splintered. From 2006 onward, [AMNO] has contracted the services of many ailing insurgent groups.”¹⁴⁰

The eventual rift between AQI and the tribes was not a foregone conclusion; after all, AQI and the Anbar tribes had one (big) thing in common: a hatred of Iran and the Shi’a. Al-Anbar Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu-Risha’s oft-stated fears of Iran were more likely thinly veiled jabs at the new Shi’a leadership (one and the same, he’d say). Seemingly from the moment AQI arrived, many of the Anbar tribes were champing at the bit for security; AQI killing a Sheikh for refusing to marry a daughter into AQI and allow the group to establish familial roots is considered by experts to have been the ‘last straw.’¹⁴¹

For all Sunnis in Iraq, according to Maliki, “this was a time of loss.”¹⁴² Formerly the key beneficiaries of the power structure – Saddam was, after all, a member of the prominent al-Tikriti tribe, neighbors of Anbar both spiritually and geographically – al-Anbari sheikhs now found themselves not only out of power, but with a house divided. AQI was offering a competing ideology, and specifically targeting Anbari tribesmen for recruitment. The view of Abu-Risha was clear: his community was under threat from both AQI. If offered a deal from the US, his tribe had no good alternative to fall back on. At the conclusion of this deal, the Sunni heartland would emerge a united front, and

¹⁴⁰ Michael Knights, “The JRTN Movement and Iraq’s Next Insurgency,” *CTC Sentinel*, July 1, 2011, accessed January 30, 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-jrtm-movement-and-iraq%E2%80%99s-next-insurgency>.

¹⁴¹ Lt. Col. David Kilcullen, “Anatomy of a Tribal Revolt,” *Small Wars Journal*, August 29, 2007, accessed February 10, 2013, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt>.

¹⁴² See note 10, above.

while Iraq's parliamentary politics would remain divided, an intra-Sunni ceasefire would be in effect, and the meddling Shi'a many Anbaris were so fearful of would not have a bloody division to exploit.

The Awakening

The Awakening began in fits and starts, "perhaps even in late 2005... secretly and separately."¹⁴³ Early in 2006, a tribal leader came to the joint US Army and Marine Corps 3/3-1 Military Transition Team, "to broker some form of cooperation in Habbaniyah. [As a result] violence had dropped off significantly, locals were far more forthcoming with tips, and the battalion was becoming a respected presence." Targeted by local insurgents, US leadership in the area lamented that their "catch and release" program was "reincarnating the bad guys," and preventing them from "significant progress in reducing the enemy's numbers and capabilities in al-Anbar province."¹⁴⁴ A few short days after the Habbaniyah tribal leader's approach, "a special operations night raid detained an influential imam, derailing a much-anticipated meeting with the sheikh and sending violence skyrocketing again."¹⁴⁵ 3/3-1's description of Habbaniyah prior to the Awakening captures US concerns: "the local insurgents are easily co-opted by al-Qaeda, either through intimidation or just due to a plain dislike of US and Iraqi security forces."¹⁴⁶ The US thus did not want to give up its aggressive pursuit of terrorists and insurgents and,

¹⁴³ See note 142, above.

¹⁴⁴ Bill Roggio, "Habbaniyah and the 3/3-1 Snake Eaters," *The Long War Journal*, January 29, 2007, accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/01/habbaniyah_and_the_3.php.

¹⁴⁵ Peter J. Munson, USMC, "Book Review: Owen West's "The Snake Eaters,"" *Small Wars Journal* April 25, 2012, accessed March 30, 2013 <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/book-review-owen-wests-the-snake-eaters..>

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

while willing to work with amenable locals, was comfortable with breaking their trusts and putting US counter-terrorism priorities first.

So how did things look to the al-Anbar tribes in late 2006? Iraqi police Maj. Gen. Najim Abed al-Jabouri cites four key trends that made negotiating with the US palatable to the larger al-Anbar tribal community: “First, security had greatly deteriorated, and Sunnis felt vulnerable to both AQI and sectarian attacks. Second, people noticed a change in the U.S. attitude toward the Sunnis. [Third] they saw that Sheikh Abdul Sattar was successfully working with the Americans. Finally, Sunnis were receptive to U.S. support in September 2006 because the resistance groups had already been at war with al Qaeda.”¹⁴⁷

The US was in a similar position of readiness – it had already fought two major battles each in Ramadi and Fallujah, and perhaps the most influential American in al-Anbar was now the forward-thinking Col. Sean MacFarland, sent to “fix” Ramadi with the 1st Brigade Combat team (“The Ready First”). MacFarland had learned the “hearts and minds” approach of counterinsurgency from an eager Petraeus protégé in Tall Afar; when Petraeus took charge in early 2007, he found a ready partner and test-bed for his new approach that would not be lacking in resources or strategic attention. All eyes were on Anbar, and a successful relationship with the al-Anbar tribes was now a high priority.

Maj. Gen. John F. Kelly - former commander of Multinational Forces 1 (MNF-1) cautions anyone from claiming too much credit for “causing” the Awakening. “The sheikhs, politicians, Iraqi security force officials, and even the former Ba’athist members of the military... began to see us as a force that was sharing in their agony. Once they

¹⁴⁷ Najim Abed Al-Jabouri and Sterling Jensen, “The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening,” presented at “The Anbar Awakening: An After Action Review,” presentation delivered in Tampa, Florida, January 2010, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/iraqi-aqi-roles.html>.

tried reaching out to some soldier or Marine's outstretched hand in friendship, it was over."¹⁴⁸ But these were the same soldiers and Marines that had recently launched Operation Phantom Fury – widely referred to as “Fallujah 2” – a massive, heavy-handed urban assault that displaced thousands of Iraqis, killed 800 civilians by one estimate,¹⁴⁹ featured the controversial use of white phosphorous¹⁵⁰ - and was *extremely* unpopular with residents of al-Anbar. Fury over this campaign led to a Sunni boycott over the 2004 national elections. These two parties seemed decidedly *not* ready to sit at the same table.

One of the first tribes to publicly turn against AQI was the Albu Mahal, who only did so after a rival tribe, the Salmanis, aligned *with* AQI. In 2005 and 2006 many Anbar sheikhs were forced to confront the reality that coexistence was not an option for AQI when the group kidnapped, killed, and hid the body of Albu Mahal sheikh Abu Ali Jassim – a tremendous dishonor.¹⁵¹ AQI also “declared *haram* (forbidden) the normal range of social life. They banned cigarettes, they married the daughters of decent families without the permission of the elders.”¹⁵² Australian COIN expert David Kilcullen gets to the point: “the split started over women.”¹⁵³ In order to entrench themselves in the human terrain of al-Anbar, AQI sought to intermarry with local women – a practice common

¹⁴⁸ Colonel Gary T. Montgomery and Chief Warrant Officer-4 Timothy S. McWilliams, *Al-Anbar Perspectives* (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2009): x.

¹⁴⁹ Dahr Jamail, “Red Cross Estimates 800 Iraqi Civilians Killed in Fallujah,” *Democracy Now!* November 17, 2004, accessed March 30, 2013, http://www.democracynow.org/2004/11/17/red_cross_estimates_800_iraqi_civilians.

¹⁵⁰ Jackie Spinner, Karl Vick, and Omar Fekeiki, “U.S. Forces Battle Into Heart of Fallujah,” *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2004, A01, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35979-2004Nov9.html>.

¹⁵¹ Silverman, 73.

¹⁵² Fouad Ajami, “You Have Liberated a People,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 2007, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB118938716117822176,00.html>.

¹⁵³ See note 142, above.

across the al-Qaeda franchise. While the tribes had for years treated AQI elements as “useful idiots” in an alliance against the Shi’a and Americans, their mutual acceptance ended when AQI killed a sheikh “over his refusal to give daughters of his tribe to them in marriage, which create a revenge obligation (*tha’r*) on his people, who attacked AQI.”¹⁵⁴

In September of 2006, Abu-Risha publicly announced the formation of the Anbar Awakening Council, which transformed the informal negotiations between Anbar sheikhs and US forces from private (if well-known) arrangements into a national political project. The Anbar sheikhs’ goal was now the expulsion – or neutralization – of AQI, and their public formation of the Council and proclamation of this goal rallied some to the cause, likely attracted some interest from Shi’a lawmakers similarly threatened by AQI, and definitely riled AQI. Throughout the early phases of the US occupation, pragmatic Sunni tribal leaders had, at the local level, been willing to work with US forces in order to provide security to their own people, and the US “showed considerable pragmatism by sponsoring renunciation ceremonies in which thousands of people burned their Ba’ath membership cards, renounced violence, and pledged to help build the new Iraq.”¹⁵⁵ Throughout it was a risky move for the Anbar sheikhs, but leaders like Abu-Risha had “lost enough family members that [they] were ready to throw away caution.”¹⁵⁶

Any unit-level soldier already figured out in their interactions with the Iraqis – the “battlespace” in Iraq was not just physical, but also *relational*. A campaign directed at “liberating” and “democratizing” Iraqis and re-building their state could not depend solely on a strategy of using force to eliminate or threaten the enemy into submission. On

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Terill, 13.

¹⁵⁶ Tom Ricks, *The Gamble* (New York: Penguin, 2009): 66.

any given day in Iraq, at the most granular levels of operation, more negotiations took place than battles - and this added up: “the aggregate effect of so many successful or failed negotiations has an impact on the ability of the U.S... [to] meet American strategic goals.”¹⁵⁷

Tribal leaders gained safety from AQI, but were also able to provide for their own tribesmen as a result. Leaders like abu-Risha were the wards of “several thousand volunteers who didn’t qualify for the police, because they were illiterate, underage, or overweight... [The US] armed them with captured weapons” and helped turn them into ‘emergency battalions’ answering directly to the tribal leadership and funded by the US.¹⁵⁸ Petraeus himself commented in April 2008 that “the savings and vehicles not lost because of reduced violence [resulting from the Awakening] far outweighed the costs...”¹⁵⁹ The most important battles had to be won with negotiation. By the summer of 2007, al-Anbar province was largely cleared of al-Qaeda in Iraq,¹⁶⁰ because “when a tribe flipped and joined the Awakening, all the attacks on coalition forces would stop and all the caches of ammunition would come up out of the ground.”¹⁶¹ Though the al-Anbar tribes had long been rebelling against AQI in one form or another, the strategic intervention of the US, and their negotiations with the tribes, are what made this rebellion stick – though it cost the leader of the Awakening, Abu-Risha, his life.

¹⁵⁷ David M. Tressler, “Negotiation in the New Strategic Environment: Lessons From Iraq,” (Strategic Studies Institute: 2007): vii, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ssi/tressler-iraq-negot.pdf>.

¹⁵⁸ Ricks, (2009), 67.

¹⁵⁹ Greg Bruno, “The Role of the ‘Sons of Iraq’ in Improving Security,” *The Washington Post Special Reports*, April 28, 2008, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/28/AR2008042801120.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Montgomery and McWilliams, 13.

¹⁶¹ See note 160, above.

Declaring war on AQI was a means of forcing al-Anbar tribesmen to make a choice – they’d be targets for AQI intimidation more now than ever. Getting tribesmen into the Iraqi Army and National Police reinforced this, both by putting al-Anbar tribesmen in a set of “golden handcuffs” with a paying job they couldn’t easily leave (al-Anbar is one of the poorest governorates in Iraq) but also by putting them into a situation where they were forced to confront AQI, and in a more long-term way than they might as members of a militia. Abu-Risha also recognized “the structural characteristics of the situation that tend to make such contracts insecure” by banning election boycotts and agitating for the re-opening of the judiciary.¹⁶² Sheikh Wissam Abd al-Ibrahim al-Hardan al-Aethawi, President of the al-Anbar affiliated Iraqi Popular Front put it succinctly: “there was a common interest between us and them [the US], and that is security for all.”¹⁶³

The Anbar tribes and US forces had a major common interest in security, but defined it differently. Each side cared about the other in only strategic terms; operations in Fallujah testify that US forces were soldiers, not Peace Corps volunteers. The assault on Fallujah and agreements with al-Anbar sheikhs were two sides of the same coin: they wanted to degrade AQI, and would do it with strategic violence or strategic diplomacy.

Anbaris, for their part, cared little for the security of the Americans, and in fact deeply resented them. Interviews conducted by the Marine Corps paint a compelling picture of pre-Awakening al-Anbar: “The Americans did not want to get involved unless they were directly attacked. If an American patrol was on the highway, and they saw a dead person, they would just leave him there... If they were killed right in front of them,

¹⁶² Montgomery and McWilliams, 10.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 57.

they did not get involved. So the reaction of the Iraqi people was like, we hate the Americans.”¹⁶⁴ It took a visionary to think long-term around this mutual skepticism; this farsightedness was Abu-Risha’s gift.

Negotiations with the Americans had gone poorly for years, after all – Abu-Risha himself describes how “our American friends had not understood us when they came. They were proud, stubborn people and so were we”¹⁶⁵ – so what reason was there to expect things to change after September 2006? Dr. Thamer Ibrahim Tahir al-Assafi, a professor of Religious Studies at al-Anbar University, relates being extremely skeptical and untrusting of the Americans in 2005: in a meeting with a US commander, he accused the American of “being in cahoots with the terrorists, for looting the banks... I said, ‘Look, how can the terrorists go into a bank and take the money out, and you’re right there – and you’re not in cahoots with them?’”¹⁶⁶

US forces had been doing their part to construct the negotiating space. Col. MacFarland, commanding the Ready First in Ramadi, was ready – his unit had just been reassigned from Tall Afar, where experienced counterinsurgent McMaster had run a clinic on how to work with the locals. MacFarland, learning from McMaster, had a playbook to run: “instead of running patrols through city streets during the day and pulling them back to the base at night... [McMaster] established outposts throughout the city where troops were stationed day and night. He told his soldiers to concentrate on

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶⁵ See note 164, above.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

protecting the Iraqi residents. McMaster.. humbly apologized for past American mistakes, and told them that the time for honorable resistance had ended.”¹⁶⁷

The words of one Iraqi politician underscore how important and successful these relationship-building directives were. Sheikh Aifan Sadun al-Issawi, the Fallujah representative to the Awakening’s political party, was imprisoned in Abu Ghraib for months – and was subjected to unsavory conditions (he claims to have known Lyndie England) and only freed after a request personally lodged by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to his American counterpart. Despite all this, al-Issawi describes the US military leadership as “friends” and the US as having “helped the people too much... Then the Americans did my paperwork for me to get compensation for my [wounded] leg. They asked for the invoices... They saw how much it cost me, and they paid me back.”¹⁶⁸ However, underscoring the importance of personal relationships, he expressed to US interviewers his displeasure at the turnover of US leadership in Fallujah: “This is a big mistake. It means the advantage of having a relationship, a friend, is finished for me.”¹⁶⁹

Abu-Risha capitalized on these budding relationships and reached out to US forces, issuing a communiqué. The key points of the communiqué were: 1) Bring the Iraqi Army back to al-Anbar, and get Anbaris into the Army and National Police (more on this later); 2) declare war on AQI; 3) reclaim respect for tribal sheikhs; 4) Americans were to be considered friendly (a gesture of outreach that US forces noticed, clearly); 5) treat Ba’athists humanely; 6) do not cooperate or negotiate with AQI; 7) reopen the judiciary and restore judicial processes; 8) Anbaris were to present themselves as law-

¹⁶⁷ Bob Woodward, *Obama’s War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster): 52-53.

¹⁶⁸ Montgomery and McWilliams, 90.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

abiding government officials, not militias (an element which would foreshadow the formalization of the Sons of Iraq militias); 9) participate in politics, e.g. no more election boycotts (the point which will likely prove to have the greatest long-term impact on Iraq).¹⁷⁰ Quickly, US commanders responded to Abu-Risha's overtures in kind. The Ready First replaced a US tank they had placed in front of Abu-Risha's home with an *Iraqi* tank, at his request. Eventually, an American tank would return; as it became more "socially acceptable" to work with the Americans; it became a symbol of Abu-Risha's ability to achieve beneficial agreements and influence the Americans.¹⁷¹ US officers' negotiating playbook advised a tactical approach, with four steps: 1) focus on power and claiming value; 2) focus on interests and create value; 3) accommodate or yield to the other party when the relationship is more important than the concession; 4) avoid negotiations when they appear unpromising.¹⁷²

MacFarland would go on to address Abu-Risha's proclamations in an almost point-by-point fashion, providing his new negotiating partner with the security he sought, treating him with respect and elevating him, and encouraging him to appoint a mayor or other political leader to coordinate local rebuilding efforts (point nine.)¹⁷³ Certainly there were some in the US chain-of-command skeptical of such friendliness to a tribal leader in an area where the tribesmen had killed so many US forces; nonetheless, to "accommodate" was critical, because the relationship with Abu-Risha was of such critical

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹⁷¹ See note 170, above.

¹⁷² Tressler, 18.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 54.

importance, and because security was non-existent when Iraqis had been skeptical of US seriousness in the past.

But Abu-Risha had a perspective on national trends that MacFarland and other US commanders lacked. US units and commanders rotated in and out of theatre, and from assignment to assignment in different regions (from Tall Afar, to al-Anbar, in MacFarland's case) while Abu-Risha and the Anbaris did not. Abu-Risha and the Anbaris had a memory of enjoying life as the first class of Iraqi citizenship – it was this sort of sectarian resentment that led to the massive Sunni boycott of Iraq's first 2005 elections, that led so many Shi'a to power. A sectarian sense of superiority and fear of Shi'a appropriation of the state that were ingrained into Sunni society in the 1990s by Saddam; Anbaris often remain skeptical that assassinations of their own claimed by AQI are not, in fact, part of a Shi'a campaign or plot.

Abu-Risha was playing a much longer game than MacFarland, Petraeus, or any other US commander was. There was a strategic balance sheet in Anbar, and the costs of working with the Americans were increasingly outweighed by the costs of tolerating AQI. More importantly, the costs of either were beginning to pale in comparison to the costs of untrammelled and unopposed Shi'a control of the country. Unlike those Sunnis actually living in Baghdad (or even worse, southern Iraq), the Anbaris could safely assume that Iranian infiltration – and not disgruntled, native Arab Shi'a – was threatening their country and behind the Shi'a ascendancy. Though Abu-Risha was too savvy to say it – preferring not to show just how dire his needs were and weaken his bargaining position – many Anbar sheikhs were happy to: AQI had to be stopped only insofar as they threatened to divide Sunnis in the face of a Shi'a threat.

The Sons of Iraq

The strategic partnership between US forces and Anbar sheikhs led to the formation of the Sons of Iraq (SOI) – at which point the sectarian dimension of what had thus far been an intra-Sunni feud comes into focus. With its 100,000 members gradually integrating into Iraqi state infrastructure, the SOI is a major Sunni militia, friendly to the US and the Iraqi government, and hostile to AQI. Its significance is not just that it provided a counterbalance to AQI and other insurgent forces, but drew on tribal power structures to ensure that military-age males in Anbar joined it rather than the insurgents, and kept the insurgents out. Not only were bodies subtracted from AQI rosters, they were added to SOI rosters, a major swing in manpower. More importantly, Sunnis now had a reasonably cohesive force in line with its traditional power structures that had been able to incorporate into the Shi'a-dominated state.

But allying with the US to drive AQI out of their backyard was one thing; the formation of a militia available for operations outside of Anbar, willing to work alongside Maliki's Shi'a-led government, is another. The very name of the movement – the Anbar Awakening, or *sahwa al-Anbar* – connoted “Sunni” as much as *South Boston Irish* might connote “Catholic.” And, truth be told, Sunnis hadn't been frozen out of the government entirely.

Despite de-Ba'athification and upheaval, the Ministry of Defense and Iraqi Army were still surprisingly Sunni in character. Maliki was even able to use this to great effect, specifically selecting Sunni-dominated units for Operation: Knights' Charge. In actuality, these Sunni units came later, as earlier tactical actions by less-sectarian units were less successful. Yet this was hardly an ecumenical state of affairs within the Iraqi security

apparatus. The gradual incorporation of the Sunni SOI re-balanced power within the Ministry of Defense and created a bulwark against the undeniably Shi'a Ministry of Interior. The Emergency Response Battalions formed out of a ragtag coalition of Abu-Risha's wards gradually turned into a capability more effective and better armed than Interior Ministry Iraqi Police, which "scared [Shi'a in the government] to death."¹⁷⁴ But the Battalions were not so exclusive; the 2nd, in particular, had 10 Shi'a – and 740 Sunni.

At its peak as an independent militia, the SOI counted 100,000 members.¹⁷⁵ Paid for by the US government initially, "these were bad men that we gave a little money to stop shooting at us," one US Marine recounts, describing regular meetings with "one nefarious character who would not stop giving me the death stare and fingering his firearm."¹⁷⁶ First the US, and then the Maliki government, seemed to be heeding the old maxim, "keep your friends close, and your enemies closer." As of late 2012, "about 70,000 have been integrated into the ISF or given civilian government jobs, while 30,000 continue to man checkpoints in Sunni areas and are paid about \$300 per month"¹⁷⁷ by the Maliki government, despite long-standing rumors that they would be targeted by the Shi'a in charge in Baghdad, and the belief among many Sunnis even in Anbar that this was "not a long-term solution."¹⁷⁸ Others remain cynical, believing that this incorporation of the Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi security forces – predominately into their local police

¹⁷⁴ The Emergency Response Battalions were particularly well-known for their ability to quickly respond and deploy firepower with their truck-mounted, Soviet-era DShK machine guns. Silverman, 251.

¹⁷⁵ UPI, "Sons of Iraq Join Diyala Offensive," August 6, 2008, accessed February 10, 2013, http://www.upi.com/Emerging_Threats/2008/08/06/Sons-of-Iraq-join-Diyala-offensive/UPI-56801218068861/.

¹⁷⁶ Castiglione, 2013.

¹⁷⁷ Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Politics, Governance, and Human Rights," *Congressional Research Service*, January 15, 2013, accessed February 10, 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21968.pdf>.

¹⁷⁸ Castiglione, 2013.

departments, thus putting them under the control of the Ministry of Interior – is just a way for Maliki to ultimately undermine them, providing him “a carrot, their paycheck, and a stick, jail,” to control them.¹⁷⁹

The Awakening, though an antagonist to Shi’a elites by virtue of its very existence, continues to face a far more salient threat in AQI; Anbar is no longer in total disarray, but the victory is hardly secure. Secular Sunni Iraqiyya list member Sheikh Aifan Sadoun Aifan al-Issawi survived many AQI attempts on his life, including two in 2007. His willingness to speak out against AQI forcefully no doubt put him at risk: “I told my people, you see, they killed the kids, they killed the women. Why did they send the big tank with the chlorine? And a lot of people when they saw these bad things happen, they stopped sitting in their house, they felt they should fight, or at minimum, they should support us to fight al Qaeda. And thankfully, the people Awakened.”¹⁸⁰ Aifan’s enemies in AQI were, of course, also the enemies of the Iraqi government elite; Iraqi security forces captured “Mullah” Fallah Hamadi, Aifan’s *bête noir* and AQI emir for Fallujah, in 2011. Though united against this common enemy, Aifan was wary of Maliki and the Shi’a elite, remarking in late 2011 that AQI was less a problem than “sectarian policies pursued by the Maliki government,” and that Sunni political parties like his own Iraqiyya had closed ranks in response.¹⁸¹

Aifan was assassinated in early 2013.

¹⁷⁹ Joel Wing, “Government Continues its Crackdown on Diyala Sons of Iraq,” *Musings on Iraq*, October 27, 2008, accessed February 10, 2013, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2008/10/government-continues-its-crackdown-on.html>.

¹⁸⁰ Bill Ardolino, “Suicide Bomber kills Iraqi Lawmaker who was prominent Awakening leader, and 5 others,” *The Long War Journal*, January 15, 2013, accessed March 30, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/01/suicide_bomber_kills_74.php.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Section Four: Knights' Charge

“You cannot fight sectarianism with sectarianism.” – Muqtada al-Sadr¹⁸²

Immediately after the invasion of 2003 invasion of Iraq, Professor of Middle Eastern History Yitzhak Nakash warned readers of *Foreign Affairs* “there is no single leader who can speak for all Iraqi Shi’ites, let alone oversee the transformation of postwar Iraq into an Iranian-style Islamic republic.”¹⁸³ What this section will explore is Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s attempts to become that leader. As previously mentioned, Iraq’s Shi’a have never all grouped themselves under the authority of a single religious leader – mujtahid – and not for lack of effort on the part of preachers like Sadr and bona fide Ayatollahs like Sistani. Gathering all Shi’a under a single *political* leader before 2003 would have guaranteed a likely gruesome end to that ambitious politician at the hands of Saddam’s mukhabarat. Thus it is no surprise that Iraq’s Shi’a were a group divided against themselves immediately following the end of the Ba’ath party – they had an opportunity to unify politically and exercise their majority, but seemingly none amongst them had the political skills to do so.

Nakash, the author of *The Shi’is of Iraq*, was deeply familiar with the many fissures subdividing the Shi’a community. Several prominent Iraqi Shi’a clerics have been already mentioned; the leadership and legacies of men like Sistani, Hakim, Khoei, and the three Sadrs (amongst others) all continue to ally and compete and ally again in order to maximize... what exactly? Muqtada al-Sadr seems to be interested in power and

¹⁸² Eli Sugarman and Omar al-Nidawi, “Back in Black: The Prodigal Son Returns,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 14, 2013, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138838/eli-sugarman-and-omar-al-nidawi/back-in-black?page=show>.

¹⁸³ Yitzhak Nakash, “The Shi’ites and the Future of Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs*, 82:4, 22.

militia size, while Sistani seems genuinely interested in the well-being and spiritual health of his followers. Whichever of these clerics are competing, and whatever they're competing for, until 2003 they could only hope to exercise religious leadership. The end of the Ba'ath created a new class of Shi'a leadership: the Shi'a politician. Shi'a political leaders like Iyad Allawi and Nouri al-Maliki up-ended the previous status quo of purely *religious* intra-Shi'a competition. The Shi'a side of the sectarian story, since 2003, has been a narrative of internal competition and consolidation. They fought the Sunnis, while at the same time fighting amongst themselves; the resolution of various intra-Shi'a conflicts, largely at the hands of ur-Shi'a Maliki, has deliberately and successfully enhanced their standing vis-à-vis the Sunni.

History

Iraq could not have fought the Iran-Iraq War had Iraqi Shi'a's Arab identity not trumped their religious one. The Arab Shi'a are far from a united front, however. The merchant middle class of Baghdad and Basra, historically traders linking Persians from the east and Arabs with the west, largely secularized throughout most of the 20th century, availing themselves of Western education and dissimulating themselves and their own sectarian identity in favor of Arab nationalism and their own economic livelihood. In stark contrast were the poor and increasingly urban Shi'a of the south, more eager to identify with rabble-rousers like Muqtada al-Sadr. And before him, his father; before him, his great-uncle.

But being a poor Shi'a did not brand one a Sadrist, nor did being a merchant guarantee a Shi'a followed al-Hakim and the quietist school. Sadr competed for constituents with SCIRI leader Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim far more than

Sistani. And the distance between Iraqi Shi'a clerics and their Persian counterparts were not only ideological, but at times deeply personal, and not to be taken lightly. One former political officer describes how al-Khoei "thought the whole *vilayet-e-faqih* was an innovation," and how he and Khomeini "personally did not like each other from Khomeini's time in Iraq... and disagreed very profoundly."¹⁸⁴

Despite his familial credentials, Muqtada al-Sadr's rise to prominence was somewhat improbable. His scholarly achievements did not at all build a resume that could compete with Iran-trained clerics like al-Khoei, al-Hakim, or Sistani. The religious degree he claimed to have had was known by all to be phony; due to the years of study required, "it would have been impossible for him to have acquired the degree he claimed to have." And while he might have sought the support of the Iranians (as opposed to al-Khoei) he could never quite get it - "they always looked at him like a loose cannon."¹⁸⁵ Ironically, the US painted him into Iran's camp, hurling overblown accusations at Sadr and splitting "the Shi'a into "goodies" and "baddies", deepening what was merely a class conflict by alienating the proletarian Sadrist current."¹⁸⁶ Sadr is hardly a Persophobe, (having set up scholarly residence in Iran as recently as early 2013) – but to label him as an Iranian puppet or proxy clumsily misreads Shi'a nationalism and populism and makes him more – not less – likely to seek Iranian assistance.

¹⁸⁴ Captain Richard Hinman, U.S. Army, conversation with author, February 5th, 2013. Capt. Hinman was the Deputy Political Counselor in Amman, Jordan from 2009 – 2012; prior to that, as an officer in the U.S. Army's 1st Ranger Battalion, Mr. Hinman participated in both Operation: Desert Storm and Operation: Iraqi Freedom, "during the drive on Baghdad and early insurgency... [He was] selected to deliver daily briefings and personal analysis to leaders and for work on high priority special projects."

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Peter Harling, "The new normal in Baghdad," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2, 2013, accessed March 3, 2013, <http://mondediplo.com/2013/03/02iraq>.

Thus Nakash's prediction that no single Shi'a leader would emerge seemed reasonable; powerful, charismatic, and at times violent leaders had for decades vied for leadership of the Shi'a, for most of their lives living in fear of one another as much as they lived in fear of Saddam. Even after the end of Ba'ath rule and their sudden reversal of fortune, the Shi'a, so long kept from any independent political activity at all, fought one another rather than banding together. This was not so irrational, when one considers the stakes: *de facto* control of Iraq's economic engine, the south, its only port, and the massive finances available via the hawza. With the Ba'ath gone, exiled and outlawed parties suddenly returned or re-emerged, and the first major conflict was over who would get control over the *zakat* – a massive alms-collection system that could be used to fund any number of projects. According to Capt. Hinman, many speculated that this dispute was the real cause of the rift between Sadr and al-Khoei.¹⁸⁷

But Nakash, writing in 2003, had no reason to foresee that a theretofore insignificant Damascus-based Da'wa political officer - who'd spent the previous quarter century outside of Iraq – would fare any better. But neither Sistani or any of the Sadrs had the ambition of a Bani Malik tribesman who had spent the 1980s and 1990s living variously under the *kunya* Abu Esraa and the pseudonym Jawad. He retired both of these *nomes de guerre* when a pathway to political power opened up. Finding himself in the right place at the right time, Nouri al-Maliki returned to using his family name. And he moved to consolidate a political vision for the Iraqi Shi'a on a scale never before seen.

¹⁸⁷ See note 186, above.

Flashpoint: Basra

Control and order in Basra – the economic capital, oil terminal, and main port, linking to the deep-water berths of Umm Qasr – was and remains key to control of the country. To Saddam, Basra was a resource to exploit and a polity that could be controlled through oppression and coercion. The 1991 and 1999 uprisings there were met with a great deal of force, and made Basra the main target of Fedayeen reprisals and ballistic missiles. To Saddam, the Basrawi Shi'a could only be a problem, the perpetual target of Iranian overtures from across the Shatt al-Arab. Basra's oil terminals were a boon to the Ba'ath, but its people were only ever a problem.

To Maliki, however, Basra presented a sort of Melian challenge. Basra's two million-plus Shi'a could either be Maliki's greatest source of strength – or the biggest threat to his consolidation of power. The Shi'a middle-class whose support Maliki could count on were, throughout the nineties, out-populated by rural Shi'a and Marsh Arabs relocating to the city to escape the economic deprivations of the 1990s sanctions and the draining of the marshes, respectively. By 2003, the natural constituency of a populist demagogue like Muqtada al-Sadr had demographically taken the city from Maliki's urban, educated elites.

The conservative re-imagining of Basra abortively undertaken by Iran-trained expatriates was resumed by more populist Shi'a groups like Fadhila (itself a group that followed the teachings of Sadr's father, Sadr II, even as it competed with Sadr III) and Sadr's rival faction, the Mahdi Army. Just as the casinos were the first targets in 1991, “graffiti warnings sprung up throughout Basra threatening women wearing make-up or without strict Islamic dress... [and] prohibited Western and Arabic secular music,

violently punishing individuals caught selling or playing it. The militia only permitted religious songs or ringtones, many of which praised Muqtada al-Sadr.”¹⁸⁸ Most threatening to Maliki was intolerance of ISCI- and Maliki-brand moderate Shi’ism implied by all these prohibitions. Basra became as much a totalitarian state devoted to Sadr as Iraq had been to Saddam.

But Sadr’s reach extended far beyond Basra. “Between 2006 and 2008, [Sadr] openly challenged Maliki’s government for control of Basra, Karbala, Maysan, and several neighborhoods in Baghdad,” forcing Maliki’s hand and “thereby precipitating a large-scale military confrontation” that would eventually materialize in the form of Operation: Knights’ Charge.¹⁸⁹ If Baghdad was run by Da’wa, then Basra was run by all the other Shi’a parties, and Operation: Knights’ Charge may have sprung at least in part from a desire to not let the work of one enable another. For instance, ISCI’s Badr Brigades were well-known to have been responsible for the thorough (and ruthless) de-Ba’athification of Basra.¹⁹⁰ Owing to the demographics of Basra, this would have meant a likely great deal of intra-Shi’a violence, which not only made Maliki appear weak – to Sunnis who saw a Shi’a monolith he was unable to control – it made him *actually* weak, in that Sunni critics were correct.

If Basra wasn’t with Maliki, then it was against him. The decision to act that would take form as Operation: Knights’ Charge “stemmed from a series of distinct economic, security, and political considerations... The widespread corruption, oil smuggling militia control of Iraq’s shipping hub all posed a serious economic threat to a government beset

¹⁸⁸ Marisa Cochrane, “The Battle for Basra,” *Iraq Report 9, Institute for the Study of War*, June 4, 2007.

¹⁸⁹ See note 184, above.

¹⁹⁰ See note 186, above.

by debt. The security problems resulting from escalating violence and militia control also posed the practical problems for the conduct of the election. If the government forces were unable to secure the city, they surely would not be able to secure the polling stations and prevent voter intimidation.”¹⁹¹ It was the threat of political non-cooperation that was Maliki’s biggest concern, and action in Basra –despite the risks – presented an opportunity to demonstrate, for lack of a better term, ‘backbone.’ Confronting co-religionists in Basra presented Maliki to the international community as a Wild West lawman, and improved his credit rating in the US ahead of the 2008 election; “better to do it [in 2008], so that it will be fresh in the minds of the Iraqi or American electorate when they go to the polls in the fall.”¹⁹² But Operation: Knights’ Charge was not just theatre for the Americans, of course; “the additional effect of weakening a major Shi’a rival by reasserting government control was an added incentive.”

But why take the risk of attacking your own sect? Surely the Shi’a of Basra, despite being more in line with Sadr’s populist trend, would have been friendlier to Maliki than the Sunnis of Anbar. Why not buy them off, or make some sort of strategic alliance? Some think that Maliki, familiar with the history of the region, may have been seeking a “King Hussein” moment, i.e., demonstrating his strength to opposing factions by acting severely against his own. Capt. Hinman - who watched former Iraqi liaisons execute the operation from the safety of Amman - also likens Maliki in this instance to Irish Republican Army leader Michael Collins, who “beat down the internal factions that

¹⁹¹ Cochrane, 6.

¹⁹² Juan Cole, “Why al-Maliki attacked Basra,” *Salon.com*, April 1, 2003, accessed March 3, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2008/04/01/basra_3/.

wouldn't accept the best deal they were going to get.”¹⁹³ The operation also explicitly targeted the Sadrists while avoiding others. ISCI, for instance, and its Badr militias, “were left unmolested.”¹⁹⁴ The Badr Brigades also paved the way for Maliki to target the Sadrists without the threat of any Ba’athist revanchists getting involved, as Badr had ruthlessly purged the area of Ba’athists – Sunni and Shi’a alike – following the invasion.¹⁹⁵ Ultimately the message of the operation was not hard to discern; Iraqis are shrewd political observers, and the factions involved well-versed in making and breaking alliances - the Sadrists had only recently handed Maliki the Prime Ministership, after all. But “by partially dealing with [the factions] Maliki could avoid being held for ransom by any... [favoring] a persistently dynbamic pattern of wheeling and dealing.”¹⁹⁶ But it wasn't easy.

The “massively clumsy” operation was Maliki’s way of “putting Sadr in his place,” and “really unpleasant for Basra.”¹⁹⁷ Iraqi Army Staff Colonel Abbas Ayed Radad – commander of 7th Division, 29th Brigade, 3rd Battalion - describes it thusly: “There was an organization interfering in civilian life there. They controlled the port and some government buildings. So our law wasn’t working there. Nothing worked well, and they were taking government funds for themselves. They enforced their own rules. I know that they killed more than 75 women in Basra at that time. So our mission was a success. We

¹⁹³ See note 186, above.

¹⁹⁴ Muttitt, 238.

¹⁹⁵ See note 186, above.

¹⁹⁶ Muttitt, 304-5.

¹⁹⁷ Robert Kunzig, USAID, conversation with author, February 10, 2013. Mr. Kunzig supported civil society projects in Baghdad for USAID from 2009-2012.

returned the honor of the country, and we gained the trust of the people, and we took democracy back.”¹⁹⁸

Operations began inauspiciously, to say the least. It seems in hindsight clear that Maliki and the Iraqi general staff significantly underestimated the resistance and challenges they would face. Despite the inclusion of battle-tested and elite forces like the Awakening-spawned Emergency Response Battalions and Iraqi special operations forces, the operation relied heavily on the raw 14th Army Division, which had only graduated from training five weeks prior to the March 25th kick-off. At the onset of hostilities, as many as 1,000 Iraqi security forces, primarily from the 14th, defected. Despite this, Maliki’s forces were able to roll through the outlying neighborhoods of Basra; momentum only slowed when Operation: Knights’ Charge reached the Mahdi Army stronghold of al-Husayn. Clearing operations would continue well into April, but the apparent failure to take Basra in one quick push led many commentators to proclaim Maliki a failure and the Iraqi security forces an incompetent waste of US money and training efforts;¹⁹⁹ close air support provided by US forces played a decisive role. Regardless, by the summer of 2008, Maliki’s government was the leviathan in Basra. Baghdad’s control had been re-established, by force.

Operation: Knights’ Charge was based around the Baghdad security operations that had recently been so successful in re-taking that city, which meant that the “build” and “hold” phases were just as - if not more - important than the “clear” phase. And the turnaround in Basra has been, by all accounts, surprising and stark. By May 2008 (in a series of “build” moves) Iraqi security forces took great pains to deliver humanitarian

¹⁹⁸ Montgomery and McWilliams, 239.

¹⁹⁹ See note 194, above.

services like food, water, and medical support to residents of the neighborhoods hardest hit by their offensives. Extra efforts were also taken to recruit Basrawis into the security forces, which sought to gain public support by providing jobs but also sought to bind the fates of the fiery locals to the fate of the Iraqi state.²⁰⁰ Sadr decried Maliki's operations and vowed to continue his "war of liberation" throughout April and early May, but was finally cowed into declaring a cease-fire on May 19. Tellingly, he did so not from Basra but from Sadr City, Baghdad – where he had been hiding out throughout the campaign.

Policy and outreach that would have been seen as crass and disingenuous when undertaken by the US saw results when undertaken by Maliki and the Iraqi security forces. According to British risk mitigation firm AKE, as of early 2013 Basra was one of the safest governorates in Iraq, seeing only 2-3 terrorist attacks per quarter in 2012. In Basra and nearby Maysan, "community vigilance is often higher, and terrorist groups find it harder to operate in the area, particularly if they are aligned with radical [Sunni] Islamist organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda."²⁰¹ Others report that "with the militias at bay, many residents are venturing out for the first time in since the operations began. Shops and restaurants have reopened, many of them playing formerly-banned Arabic music. Basra's Corniche, the city's famous riverfront promenade, is crowded with residents, even late into the evening. Alcohol is again for sale in some shops, albeit discreetly. At Basra University, male and female students interact freely, and strict

²⁰⁰ Cochrane, 13.

²⁰¹ Joel Wing, "Overview of Security in Iraq in 2012, Interview With John Drake," *Musings on Iraq*, January 14, 2013, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2013/01/overview-of-security-in-iraq-2012.html>.

Islamic styles of dress are being replaced with more secular and even Western styles.”²⁰² Most significant to Maliki’s state-building project are reports that Iraqi security forces are now manning checkpoints – instead of the Mahdi Army.

From the Streets to the Chambers

Though badly bloodied, Sadr (or at least his allies) remain unbowed. In early 2013, the de-Ba’athification commission surprised many by targeting the Shi’a Supreme Court Chief Justice Midhat al-Mahmud; Mahmud, well-known as a former Ba’athist, changed his stripes as early as 2008 as the court aligned increasingly with Maliki’s policies and deliberately turned a blind eye on the Ba’ath credentials of many of Maliki’s top generals.²⁰³ He was the man responsible for approving and issuing Tariq al-Hashemi’s death warrant. But then, suddenly, Mahmud was targeted for removal by the de-Ba’athification commission, specifically by Sadrists MP Sabah al-Saadi and the de-Ba’athification commission head Falah Hassan Shanshal.²⁰⁴²⁰⁵

The reason this was even able to happen at *all* was the appointment of a new commission in May of 2012, led by Shanshal. Several Sadrist judges were able to gain the necessary Parliamentary approval votes allegedly via backroom deals made with Kurds and the Sunni Iraqiyya list. At the time, it was assumed that Maliki was “leaving

²⁰² “Operation Knight’s Charge: Saulat al-Fursan,” *Institute for the Study*, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/operation/operation-knights-charge-saulat-al-fursan>.

²⁰³ Reidar Visser, “The Political Dynamics Behind the Downfall of Midhat al-Mahmud, Iraq’s Supreme Court Chief,” *Iraq and Gulf Analysis*, February 15, 2013, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://gulfanalysis.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/the-political-dynamics-behind-the-downfall-of-midhat-al-mahmud-iraqs-supreme-court-chief/>.

²⁰⁴ Joel Wing, “Iraq’s Latest Controversy: The Removal of Chief Justice Medhat Mahmoud,” *Musings on Iraq*, February 20, 2013, accessed February 20, 2013, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2013/02/iraqs-latest-controversy-attempted.html>.

²⁰⁵ “Judicial institution proved its independence, says Ahrar bloc,” *AK News*, September 13, 2012, accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/326151/>.

the role of being Ba'athist hardliner to the Sadrists," perhaps seeing de-Ba'athification as an appealing project for the Sadrists, and also something to keep them busy and out of his hair.²⁰⁶ This appears to have been a miscalculation, if true. Indeed, the odd coalition of Barzani's Kurds, Sadrist Shi'a, and Iraqiyya's Sunnis may have simply been taking revenge. Maliki is seen as having made his own deals with the devil that kept him in power following the June 2012 parliamentary crisis, precipitated by this very coalition.²⁰⁷ Realizing his overreach in this situation, he simply canceled all the decisions made by Shanshal following Mahmud's targeting.²⁰⁸

There seems to be a broad consensus that Maliki is turning into something of an authoritarian; but how well the clothes fit him remains hotly debated. The International Crisis Group's former Iraq Project Director describes him as "drawn into a sectarian game, but... unsure of the backing of his own community, from whom he has partially distanced himself by playing the nationalist card."²⁰⁹ Drawn in against his will, or rolling up his sleeves and wading in eagerly? Rather than being eager to please, Capt. Hinman describes how Maliki sought to portray himself as the protector of the Iraqi Shi'a by deliberately offending the various foreign parties the Arab Shi'a distrust; "[Maliki has]

²⁰⁶ Reidar Visser, "Iraq Gets a New De-Ba'athification Board but the Supreme Court Becomes a Parody," *Iraq and Gulf Analysis*, May 7, 2012, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://gulfanalysis.wordpress.com/2012/05/07/iraq-gets-a-new-de-baathification-board-but-the-supreme-court-becomes-a-parody/>.

²⁰⁷ The Iraqi constitution requires a no-confidence vote by half of Iraq's 325 MPs; the opposition reportedly had gathered 160, threatening to reach critical mass – but 13 were withdrawn or suspended at the eleventh hour, sapping the initiative's momentum. Patrick Markey, "Foes of Iraq's Maliki cannot force confidence vote," *Reuters*, June 10, 2012, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/06/10/iraq-politics-idINDEE85907G20120610>.

²⁰⁸ National Iraqi News Agency, "Maliki cancels all decisions taken by the Accountability Commission during Shanshal's presidency," February 18, 2013.

²⁰⁹ Peter Harling, "The new normal in Baghdad," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2, 2013, accessed March 3, 2013, <http://mondediplo.com/2013/03/02iraq>.

managed to thread this difficult needle, where [the US is] not happy with him, the Iranians aren't happy with him, and the rest of the Sunni Arab world still thinks he's in Iran's pocket."²¹⁰ If you can demonstrate that you're willing to stand up to all these foreign interlopers, the thinking goes, then the Shi'a will see you as a capable protector. They might even forgive you for leveling city blocks in Basra with US bombs.

On some level, the competition with Sadr comes down to one of ideological contrast: one of authoritarian order, or "a path of perpetual war." Other commentators were just as ready to proclaim Maliki Iraq's new dictator, but gave him a much higher grade, lauding him for having "combined threats and a selective application of the law against his opponents, including a politically motivated show trial for terrorism charges against former Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni.... [and] pushed aside Sadr and the various Shia parties."²¹¹

Many counsel caution for Maliki. Ahmed Hassan - a taxi driver detained by the Interior Ministry at a prison allegedly overseen by Maliki himself - offers that "I would tell him that history always repeats itself, and Maliki is behaving like Saddam... If you continue turning a deaf ear and blind eye to this oppression, one day you will end up like Saddam Hussein."²¹² What Hassan is suggesting is that Iraqi politicians raised either within or in opposition to the Ba'ath order in Iraq only know how to behave one way politically. Or, in the words of Capt. Hinman, "this is all these guys know."²¹³

²¹⁰ See note 186, above.

²¹¹ See note 184, above.

²¹² Dahr Jamail, "Iraq Execution Spree Under Spotlight," *Al-Jazeera [English] Features*, September 12, 2012. Accessed online February 18, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/09/201291081633731250.html>.

²¹³ See note 186, above.

Lingering Obstacles

Though Maliki has made great strides against the Sadrists, other spoilers have emerged. Iran in particular, frustrated by the intransigence and declining position of Sadr, has found new clients. Take the case of As'aib Ahl al-Haq (the League of the Righteous, referred to hereafter as AAH). AAH received increasing support from Iran in 2005-6, prior to the civil war; Sadr was proving difficult to control, and AAH's leader, Qais al-Khazali, "had a close relationship to Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps – Qods Force [the IRGC's external operations wing] through his liaison Ali Mussa Daqduq," a Lebanese Hezbollah officer.²¹⁴ AAH expert Sam Wyer explains that "Tehran saw al-Khazali as a much more dependable and stable replacement to Moqtada al-Sadr, whose sporadic actions made him difficult to control." But Tehran is not the only capital that sees the utility of a small, effective Shi'a extremist group like AAH; Wyer, again, notes that "Maliki wants to use the League as political leverage over Moqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist Trend. Even though Maliki has historically been able to draw in the Sadrists when needed, such as during the 2010 government formation, and push them away when they grow too strong, as seen with the 2008 Knights' Charge operation, he would probably love to see the League challenge Sadr's support base in Iraq."²¹⁵

Wyer notes that the marriage between Maliki and AAH is solely one of convenience, however. It is seen by many as a scheme to outflank Sadr on the right, who "fears that Maliki will marginalize him, too, once he is done with the Sunni Arabs... [While AAH]

²¹⁴ Joel Wing, "Analysis of the History and Growth of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the League Of The Righteous, An Interview With Sam Wyer," *Musings on Iraq*, January 7, 2013, accessed March 30, 2013 <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2013/01/analysis-of-history-and-growth-of-asaib.html>.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

is creating its own political party to challenge Sadr for the backing of his core constituency.”²¹⁶ Maliki and AAH “acknowledge friendly relations and don’t discount the possibility that they could strike an electoral pact;” the Shi’a director of the Maliki-backed Center for Religious Rapprochement is more blunt: “Maliki needs Shiite figures to split the Sadrists.”²¹⁷ The group, with Maliki’s tacit support, is expected to win a few seats in the next election, though it’s Iranian affiliation may hurt it; though the group “tiptoes around the nature of its relationship with Iran,” they “welcome the positive interference of neighboring countries,” according to their newly-freed leader Qais al-Khazali.²¹⁸

Maliki has benefitted tremendously from the 2011 withdrawal of US forces. As of mid-2012, the percentage of Iraqis that approved of his prime ministership eclipsed the percentage that disapproved for the first time, by a healthy margin – 53% to 44%. During that same time period, despite his ongoing rifts with other major Shi’a groups and leaders like Sadr, his approval rating among Shi’a climbed to 66%. Even in the south, which had only years earlier felt the brunt of Knights’ Charge, his favorability sat at 73%, with only 17% disapproving – by far his lowest disapproval rating from either region or sect.

Finally, Maliki’s approval rating amongst “disaffected Shi’a” climbed, while Sadr’s

²¹⁶ See note 184, above.

²¹⁷ Liz Sly, “Iranian-backed militant group in Iraq is recasting itself as a political player,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2013, accessed February 18, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iranian-backed-militant-group-in-iraq-is-recasting-itself-as-a-political-player/2013/02/18/b0154204-77bb-11e2-b102-948929030e64_story.html.

²¹⁸ Khazali was freed after the group took British contractor Peter Moore hostage and offered him in exchange for Khazali’s release. Liz Sly, “Iranian-backed militant group in Iraq is recasting itself as a political player,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2013, accessed February 18, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iranian-backed-militant-group-in-iraq-is-recasting-itself-as-a-political-player/2013/02/18/b0154204-77bb-11e2-b102-948929030e64_story.html.

fell.²¹⁹ Assuming these numbers paint an accurate picture – and public opinion polling in states like Iraq has never been easy – what they show is a Maliki who has consolidated at least his political standing amongst his natural constituency, the Shi’a. Despite the plethora of political and religious figures vying for the role, Iraq’s Shi’a approve of Maliki more than all others. It should be noted that this all occurs within the context of increased optimism about the direction of Iraq nationwide, following the US withdrawal.

²¹⁹ A definition of “disaffected Shi’a” is not provided within the group’s methodology of face-to-face surveys, but it seems reasonable to assume that respondents identified themselves as such. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, “A Major Shift in the Political Landscape,” National Democratic Institute, May 2012, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://www.ndi.org/files/NDI-Iraq%20-%20April%202012%20National%20Survey%20-%20Presentation.pdf>.

Section Five: The Future

... War consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known; and therefore the notion of time is to be considered in the nature of war, as it is in the nature of weather. For as the nature of foul weather lieth not in a shower or two of rain, but in an inclination thereto of many days together: so the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. –Thomas Hobbes²²⁰

Iraqi sectarianism is unlikely to lessen anytime soon, so long as Shi'a and Sunni see one another as their primary competitors for power, remember events differently, and pursue opposing political purposes. "Divergent narratives will always exist," Haddad cautions; "when an overarching sense of nationalism recedes in favour of exclusivist nationalism, a greater number of people will subscribe to what was previously the concern of a fringe minority."²²¹ Though this exclusivist nationalism has become decidedly less violent since the end of the Civil War and consolidations of The Awakening and Operation: Knights' Charge, it is no less salient. Evident in the cases examined is an Iraqi society still assertively, actively sectarian, far from the "banal sectarianism... devoid of any active dynamism and [restricting] itself to the background of a person's conception of self... the most conducive to sectarian harmony."²²²

But the severity of the Civil War casts a pall over the country and especially over Baghdad. Though its violence overlapped with the violence of the US occupation, there remains a profound sense among Sunni and Shi'a of the costs of sectarianism let loose. Euphemisms of "sectarian events" continue to "[hang] over the city. Everyone has his

²²⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, accessed March 31, 2013, <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-c.html>.

²²¹ Haddad, 23.

²²² *Ibid.*, 25-26.

own map of familiar, reassuring, ‘stabilised’ places, and other areas where they dare not return.”²²³ As has proven to be the case in other areas emerging from social conflict of this nature – the Balkans come to mind – it will take decades of calm before the spaces claimed by one side in the worst years of the conflict feel like anything other than killing fields to the other.

Similarly, though this paper argued that the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shi’a in Iraq was a relatively young phenomenon, that does not mean it cannot be reactivated easily. The paroxysms of violence in the former Yugoslavia were fed by centuries-old ethno-religious memories, while the mass slaughter of Rwanda relied on ethnic grievances centuries-old but codified towards the end of the colonial era, only decades prior. In Iraq, as in those countries, “hostile myths lie dormant but remain ever ready to be reawakened and revised to suit the needs of a future crisis,” with a “reservoir of antagonistic myths that can be drawn upon in times of heightened sectarian tension.”

²²⁴ For much of the history of modern Iraq, “such negative sentiments and stereotypes [were] usually dormant and irrelevant in Sunni-Shi’a relations unless aroused by events, circumstances, or an inquisitive academic.”²²⁵ Even more disconcerting is how grievances and perceived wrongs can somehow be magnified by sectarian leaders in order to provoke actions seemingly far out of proportion to the historical wrongs. The lesson of the post-intifada era is that these dormant grievances can be tapped into to great effect. This may be Saddam Hussein’s most enduring contribution to Iraqi society; it is

²²³ Peter Harling, “The new normal in Baghdad,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2, 2013, accessed March 3, 2013, <http://mondediplo.com/2013/03/02iraq>.

²²⁴ Haddad, 20.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

then no surprise that the man who midwifed the Sunni-Shi'a conflict in Iraq went to the gallows mocking Iraq's next generation of leaders who would be left to deal with it. Reportedly, Saddam's executioners mocked him on his way to the gallows, repeating Sadr's name. Saddam sneered and spit the same name back at them from the noose, likely secure in the knowledge that – if history was to be any guide - just as he would not die of old age, neither would Sadr.²²⁶

²²⁶ “Witness: Saddam Hussein argued with guards moments before death,” *CNN World*, December 30, 2006, accessed March 31, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/12/30/hussein/index.html?_s=PM:WORLD.

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