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The rise and fall of civil society in Iraq

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As a sovereign nation Iraq is a recent creation. It was formed by the British in 1919 out of provinces of the Ottoman Empire. While its borders may be arbitrary and contested, it does not follow that Iraq does not have the heart of a real nation, shared by the different groups who live within them. Iraq is much more than the sum of conflicting ethnic and religious groups. It is a country where people have developed a sense of being Iraqi.

My purpose here is to explore how this has evolved. For it was a fragile process that was promptly assaulted by the Ba'ath regime, which Saddam Hussein went on to capture in 1979. I want to try and describe how identification with the modern Iraqi nation began, so that we can appreciate how demanding it will be for it to re-emerge after his dictatorship.

I will do this in the main through the stories of two Iraqis who were citizens of that emerging country. These are only two of many such stories but their obvious uniqueness will, I hope, bring to life the opportunities and tensions that were experienced by the generations who came to make themselves Iraqis after 1919.

Then I will look at how the current regime perverted and exploited local and traditional allegiances for its own ends. But first, some reflections on the early development of civil society in Iraq.

1. The origins of Iraqi civil society

It is commonly said that the Iraqi population is divided into Sunni Muslims in the middle, Shi'a Muslims in the south and Kurds in the north, and that this division constitutes the main bases of political solidarity and affiliation, to the extent of endangering the unity of the country.

Those who know Iraq [1] well will recognise this conventional wisdom as a caricature. True, these are important lines of division, and certain Kurdish forces have a long history of nationalist struggle, yet this view hides the many elements shared by the three groups.

Above all, the emphasis on internal division obscures the formation of a modern civil society in Iraq during the 20th century when political and cultural networks and identities evolved, which drew active participation from members of all communities, not on the basis of communal solidarity but through ideological commitment, commercial interests and political factions. It is the suppression of this autonomous process under successive governments, and their near-elimination under the Ba'athist regime, which now makes the internal divisions based on ethnicity and religion so threatening and significant. The tragedy of Iraq is the loss of the ties that bind, not their non-existence.

I use 'civil society' in a specific sense. I mean the society of citizens, those active agents in a public space, involved in associations, commerce and parties, who informed debates and public

life. In Iraq, as in other societies emerging into modernity in the 19th and 20th centuries from an imperial or colonial past, it was the creation of a modern nation state that established the conditions for a civil society, which was linked to but larger than the official sphere itself.

It was the world of government functionaries, intellectuals, teachers, journalists, artists, the modern sectors of business, traders and financiers and the professions and, in some instances, extending to sectors of the 'common people' such as organised elements of the working classes who consciously linked themselves to the national and international situation.

At first, these strata coexisted with 'traditional' sectors. Here were found the majority of the Iraqi population, who were still governed by the organisation and sentiments of community – whether of tribe, religion, ethnicity, village or region, as well as groupings of bazaar, guilds and patronage networks.

The intellectuals and activists of civil society were, of course, drawn from these sectors. They bore the traces of their origins but, nevertheless, formed styles of life, outlooks and loyalties shaped by the modern political and ideological fields. Equally, the 'traditional' sectors were transformed by capitalism and modernity, and reconstituted elements of original loyalties and sentiments in relation to the modern state and its economic fields.

The members of 'tribes', for instance, were dispersed into different locations within Iraq, many of them urbanised, yet they continued to constitute networks of solidarity and mutual aid within the new, modern, situations. These different elements were also represented in the state and the political fields, with cross-cutting and contradictory currents of ideology and communal interests.

A social kaleidoscope

Modern Iraq [2] can be seen within this framework. The modern state, journalism and 'print capitalism', political parties, educational institutions, the professions and modern sectors of business, all produced their intelligentsia, people who were at least partly liberated from the bonds and horizons of kinship and primary loyalties, many with ideologically-framed aspirations pertaining to the nation and its future.

Reading the memoirs of public figures and literati of the early 20th century we find accounts of these groups, their journals and political ambitions, their venues of salons and cafes, their conspiracies and intrigues, and the conflicts that culminated in repression and violence. Different brands of nationalism (pan-Arabist and Iraqist), different ideologies (fascism, communism, and liberal notions) all mingled and fought in various groupings, parties and clubs, now public, now clandestine, occasionally feeding into military conspiracies.

The actors on this stage comprised Sunni [3] (the branch of Islam followed in most of the Muslim world, including the Arab countries and Turkey, as well as Arabs in central Iraq, most Kurds and the Iraqi ruling elite, Shi'a (the branch followed by most Iranians and by the majority of Arabs in Iraq), Christians, Jews [4] and Kurds. Every actor was identified in terms of communal origins, and these identifications were at times important in the waging of contests. But these identifications, while influencing political alignment did not determine it.

Authoritarian states invariably developed across the region once ruled by the Ottomans and these were run, in turn, by ruling cliques who found ideological politics threatening, because it aimed for reform and sometimes revolution. Certainly the influential communist mobilisation after the 1940s used mass organisation that threatened to bring sectors of the common people into the larger ideological politics of civil society.

The British remained the dominant power in Iraq from 1918–58. Far from seeking to encourage the emergence of a modern public politics, they were happier making deals with tribes and communities to assure their loyalty and cooperation. In repeated conflicts with Kurdish nationalists, for instance, governments always resorted to 'loyal' Kurdish tribes to fight on their behalf, loyalties which were often fickle and followed prevailing winds of power and interest. Religious opinion and confessional loyalties were often mobilised against the supposedly atheist communists while loyalties of clan and patronage were often at the base of the ruling cliques themselves.

2. A tale of two Iraqis

I should like at this point to narrate the tales of two different individuals. Their tales illustrate how individuals departed from their communal or ethnic roots and how they then related to it. They are Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, the illustrious poet and publicist (1903–99), and an obscure Jewish doctor I shall call Dr Naji (born in 1915).

Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri

Jawahiri (1903–1999) is renowned as much for his literary output as for his political activism. He became closely identified with the left, sympathetic to the Communist Party, celebrated or grieved the triumphs, defeats and martyrdom of popular struggles in his poetry, and suffered prison and exile on many occasions, to the last decades of his life spent in Prague, then Syria.

Jawahiri came from a family of Shi'ite ulama (Muslim scholars) in the shrine city of Najaf. In the 19th century and until the early decades of the 20th century, Najaf and Karbala operated almost as autonomous city states under the rule of rival mujtahids (interpreters of the law), combined with control of their quarters by lineages and alliances between them. Tribal 'asabiya (group solidarity, an idea utilised in Ibn Khaldun's 14th century Muqaddimah) was the dominant social bond, maintaining boundaries, factions and conflicts. Jawahiri was educated in the religious schools, which included extensive literary components, more attractive to the young student than religion.

In his late teens, his poetry found favour in the now national press, and his talent was noted. He soon found himself in Baghdad and, in 1927, through the patronage and connections of his influential uncle, was offered a job as a schoolteacher. It is at this point that religious sectarianism comes into play.

Sati' al-Husri [5], the Arab nationalist theorist and Director of Education, embarked on a programme of Arab national revival through education. Within this framework, the Shi'a were suspect: associated with Iran and with local and regional solidarities, separated from the rest of the Arab world by the boundary of religion.

In Iraq, Arabism was rooted mostly in the Sunni Arab population, while Shi'a and Kurds, if political, tended to the left, which, in turn, formed the focus for Iraqist identification. Jawahiri fell foul of Husri; the latter contended that Jawahiri was really Iranian (to Jawahiri's outrage, at this Turk, who spoke Arabic with a thick accent, questioning his Arab identity).

The job offer was withdrawn, and there followed a tussle between the token Shi'a Minister of Education and Sati'. In the meantime, also through his uncle's influence and the patronage of a Shi'a alim (member of the ulama) and notable in Baghdad, Jawahiri was introduced to King Faisal I, who liked the young man and appointed him to the Court Diwan (diwan al-tashrifat) alongside the sons of some illustrious families, where he served for three years.

So far, the roles are being played to the letter: Najafi nasab (lineage), as well as the young man's talents, bring him to high and promising office. Faisal was playing a balancing game, and among all the ex-Ottoman Sunni, Syrians and Hijazi, he made a token appointment of an Iraqi and a Shi'a. Jawahiri, however, ruined his prospects by refusing to continue with the game. As part of his active and turbulent literary and journalistic life, Jawahiri was increasingly his own man, adopting critical and outspoken stances.

In one of these, he turned against the loyalty of nasab and attacked prominent ulama of Najaf. These ulama had opposed the foundation of a girls' school in the shrine city, and Jawahiri published a poem al-Raj'iyyun (The reactionaries), a biting satire on the hypocrisy and venality of the ulama. It included the line: wa minhum lususun, wa minhum lawatun wa-zanatu (and in their ranks there are thieves and pederasts and fornicators). Predictably, this drew the ire of the notables, and a flood of protests to the King for sheltering such a person. This was the very constituency that the King had tried to cultivate through appointing Jawahiri. This was the beginning of the end for his court career.

Thereafter, Jawahiri was thrown into the world of literature, journalism and politics, all closely interwoven in that village-like public sphere of the incipient Iraqi nation. He soon developed a distinctive critical voice, and a life of political adventure. Yet, under the monarchical regime (which ended in 1958) Jawahiri continued to draw on the patronage and influence of the political elite, including royal personalities. These were deeply ambivalent connections, on both sides, yet it did procure him positions, grants and mediations when he found himself in trouble and difficulty, which was often.

After the 1958 revolution, Jawahiri was showered with honours and positions, but not for long. He soon fell out with General Qasim and ended up in exile. The Ba'athist regime's attempts to woo him back did not succeed.

Jawahiri, then, is a good example of the detachment and deracination of the individual from corporate allegiance, as part of the process of the formation and imagination of the nation. Many were to follow in that path. The Iraqi left, and particularly the Communist Party, was a magnet for the renegades from all communities, who abandoned the bonds and securities of primary allegiance in favour of a political identification as citizen and patriot. Jawahiri spoke this sentiment in his famous line: ana al-Iraqu, lisani qalbuhu, wa-dami furatuhu, wa-kiyani minhu ashtaru (I am Iraq, my tongue is her heart, my blood her Euphrates, my being from her branches formed).

Dr Naji

Naji was born in 1915, and qualified as a doctor in 1936. Thereafter, lacking the resources and connections to engage in an urban practice, he continued in government employment. In that he also suffered from discrimination as a Jew, and lacked the patronage necessary for a more favourable posting. He worked in rural and provincial posts until the end of the 1950s, when he retired to Baghdad and engaged in private practice. He remained there until 1970, when after the 1968 Ba'athist coup, terror campaigns against many sectors of Iraqi society started with the Jews. Naji was imprisoned and maltreated, and eventually left Iraq with the near totality of the remaining Jews. I met and interviewed him in London in the late 1980s.

Naji was not particularly political, and did not deliberately detach himself from the religious community. His deracination was a cumulative process, conditioned by his physical separation from the centres of Jewish life, and his absorption into Iraqi provincial life. Although there were other Jewish doctors in a similar position, they were widely dispersed. There were also small Jewish communities in the provincial centres near his work.

However, he found little in common with them; he said of the Jews of ‘Ana, where he was posted at one point, that they were like the local ‘Arabs’ (here meaning ‘Bedouins’ or country people). Their customs, speech and dress were like their Muslim neighbours, and as such unlike Baghdadi Jews, especially the educated strata of the capital. Naji had much more in common socially and mentally with other government functionaries and professionals posted in the area.

These usually had their own club, Nadi al-Muwadhafin, where they met to chat, play games and drink. Naji neither gambled nor drank, but the club was still his main venue of sociability. He also mixed with the local notability, for whom he cared in his professional capacity. He was expected to attend public celebrations and official dinners, together with the Qa’im maqam, or district officer. At this level, Naji was integrated into the life of provincial functionaries, and detached from his Jewish communal connections and networks, except during periods of leave when he visited his family in Baghdad. At times, in his own words, he forgot that he was a Jew, as the following episode indicates.

Once, during an epidemic, Naji encountered difficulty in securing premises for quarantine. The landlord of the designated house tried to renege on the deal at the last minute. To obtain the key Naji had to be firm and assert his authority, to the extent of slapping the man. This was not unusual conduct in the circumstances, but Naji was later astounded at his own action: ‘I was a government official’, he reflected, ‘I forgot that I was a Jew!’

Yet he could not forget for long. The political events of the time heightened consciousness of religious divisions, especially with regard to Jews. The Second World War, combined with events in Palestine, aroused nationalist sentiments that were tinged with Nazi sympathies. The Rashid Ali coup d’état [6] in 1941 against the British and their protégés involved attacks on Jews in different parts of Iraq, and Naji was particularly exposed in the western provinces near the Syrian border, especially noted for Arabist sentiments.

At one point he had an encounter with Fawzi al-Qawuqchi [7], the Palestinian militia commander, and his men, there to support Rashid Ali, before withdrawing to Syria at his defeat. Naji had to treat their wounded, and was thanked by Fawzi after initial hesitation to shake the Jew’s hand. Later, the foundation of the state of Israel heightened anti-Jewish sentiments. While Naji continued to enjoy warm and friendly relations with his patients, local people, notables and religious dignitaries, he was increasingly the target of hostile treatment by his superiors, medics and health directors. Some were jealous of his professional success, others resentful of a Jewish presence.

As a result he was given the least desirable postings, loaded with extra work, and thus prevented from pursuing more lucrative private practice. He was deterred from resigning by a regulation that doctors retiring from government service could only engage in private practice in the location of their last posting, in this case small provincial centres. He was sacked in 1955, continued to practice in ‘Amara, where he became a legend, then moved to Baghdad at the end of the decade.

3. From citizenship to communalism

Under the rule of General Qasim, who overthrew the Hashemite monarchy in 1958 and was himself overthrown in 1963 [8], the power of the tribes, clans and communities was severely challenged by progressive policies, such as land reforms and legal reforms of family law, and by ideological politics. It was then that the Communist Party made the running in wide-ranging mobilisation of many sectors of the population. This in turn provoked reactions from opposing forces, mostly varieties of Arab nationalists.

These movements were not confined to politics but reinforced the already established cultural and artistic manifestations, from literature to theatre and the plastic arts, and an intense journalistic field to go with these. Wider sectors of the population were brought into the civil society of citizens. This political effervescence was, of course, to lead to severe and bloody conflicts in an unstable society. In these conflicts, the 'traditional' forces came forth in ideological garb, mostly as Arab nationalists. And it was these that were eventually to overthrow Qasim, in 1963, and institute a clan-based military rule, which was to metamorphose into the present regime, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, which seized power in 1968.

What characterises the Ba'ath regime [9] is the authoritarian étatisation of civil society; that is, the repression of political opposition or difference, coupled with an incorporation of all institutions and associations into the state. The Ba'ath party itself was de-ideologised in frequent purges, then reduced to a vehicle for loyalty and social control.

This was not easy to accomplish. The combination of bloody repression and incorporation proceeded at a gradual pace through the 1970s, particularly with the manoeuvre of bringing the Communist Party [10] into a common front in government, culminating in the final repression of the party and all its popular associations towards the end of that decade.

The society of citizens was eliminated. They were regimented into the ranks of the party and of loyalty to the ruling clique, their intellectual and cultural products dictated by these considerations. Those who resisted suffered the usual horrors of imprisonment, torture and execution and often the victimisation of their families. The lucky ones escaped to join the ever-expanding communities of exiles (estimated in the millions). Those that remained were reduced to voices of the rulers, often persecuted and humiliated by party and security thugs put in charge of universities and cultural institutions.

A recent novel, Hayat Sharara's Idha al-ayamu aghsaqat (When Darkness Falls), narrates the sorrows, humiliations and impoverishment of university academics in the 1980s and 1990s. At one point, university teachers, alongside other public employees, are directed to lose weight by a particular date or lose rank and pay, with threat of severance. There followed frantic and painful efforts by rotund middle-aged men to comply. The description of the day of weight registration is tragi-comic, with a large number of professors scrambling to get into a small clinic, exhausted and humiliated. (The author, a professor of Russian literature, committed suicide soon after she completed the book.) These hardships are exacerbated by the drastic impoverishment of the salaried classes in the years following the Gulf War and the UN sanctions.

The cycle of Ba'athist politics

Modern nationalism started from a position of rejecting and denouncing communalism (ta'ifiya), tribalism and all sectional loyalties that conflicted with national identity and allegiance. All these communal formations were denounced as backwards (takhaluf) and corrupt, associated with reactionary forces and religious 'superstition'.

Ba'ath ideology [11], as the very word implies, declared itself a renaissance of the national spirit, forging a unity of purpose and will to fulfil the eternal mission of the Arab nation. Its slogan: ummatun 'arabiyatun wahida dhata risalatin khalidab (one Arab nation with an eternal mission).

In practice, the two Ba'athist regimes of Iraq and Syria both threw up ruling cliques based on tribal and communal solidarities. The Iraqi Ba'ath party and government came to be controlled by allied clans of Tikriti tribes, the Syrian by the Assad family, based on the loyalties of Alawi

[12] religious sectarianism. The parties were repeatedly purged to ensure complete loyalty and subservience to the ruling cliques.

At the same time, the parties became vehicles for the penetration and control of all public institutions and functions, working closely with the multiple security forces. Politics and civil society are totally incorporated into the authoritarian state. Under these conditions, the security and life-chances of any individual become dependent on their relationship to the organs and networks of the regime.

For most people, these relations are mediated through connections and solidarities of kinship and community. In the spheres of power, of government and the military, official rank is subordinated to informal connections of kinship and relations to members of the ruling clique. In the offices of state and public life, it is again connections to the centres of networks of power which procure tenure and promotion.

4. The return of tribalism and religion under Ba'ath rule

In the 1990s, after the depredations of the second Gulf War, the Hussein regime came out openly in support of tribalism. Selected tribal sheikhs were officially instated as leaders of their tribes, some of their lands restored (reversing earlier land reforms) and supplied with arms, on condition of loyalty to the regime and ensuring social and political controls in its favour. By then, of course, they constituted no threat to the regime, but could be useful as instruments of social control.

The ideology of this reversal was couched in nationalist rhetoric, extolling tribal solidarity as part of the Arab heritage, and the virtues of old. Of course, 'the tribe' at this stage is not a cohesive unit inhabiting its dira, or traditional territory; it is dispersed in various parts of the country, many of its members in Baghdad, working in diverse occupations. 'Sheikhs' are sometimes urban professionals or businessmen. They are empowered by the regime to hold tribal 'courts' to settle disputes and compensations between their members, with the regime taking a cut of all settlements. The destruction of the civil society of citizens in favour of communalist formations becomes, then, explicit official policy.

One of the few positive elements about the Ba'athist regime was its assault on traditional patriarchal relations and practices. In the 1970s and 1980s, regime policies favoured female education and wide participation in the labour market and professional occupations (but not in the echelons of government power).

Reforms in family law, started by the Qasim regime, were reversed by the Arifs [13] in the 1960s under religious pressure, and in turn revived by the Ba'athists in the 1970s. These alleviated some of the disadvantages women suffered in family matters under traditional shari'a provisions. This may have been done, in part, to challenge and intimidate religious institutions and authorities, and to weaken patriarchal bonds in favour of allegiance to the regime and its ideologies.

Many of these positive steps were reversed in the 1990s. 'Honour' killing of errant female relatives, for instance, was once again recognised in penal law and given legitimacy by exempting the killers from the penalties for murder. Violence against women was staged dramatically by forces of the regime in the recent campaign against supposed prostitutes; these women were publicly beheaded in Baghdad and other cities. This resort to patriarchal values and practices fitted in with Saddam's increasing resort to religious identification and Islamic rhetoric.

Religion as a weapon of Ba'athist power

Religious symbols and slogans have come to occupy ever-greater space in the regime's rhetoric and practice. During the war against Iran, Saddam countered Iranian claims of fidelity to Islam with his own, claiming descent from the Prophet and making pious public appearances where he engaged in prayer and patronage of mosques and shrines. This reversal of the Ba'ath's earlier secularist positions was further enhanced after the second Gulf War in the 1990s and Saddam's attempt to jump on the Arab Islamic bandwagon in its hostility to America and the west.

This play on religion had a sectarian dimension of hostility to the Shi'a. The anti-Iranian rhetoric was a thinly disguised attack on what was characterised as a foreign and heretic form of religion. Pan-Arab rhetoric against Iran was explicitly Sunni against Shi'a, and the Iraqi Shi'a as such were suspect. The regime has always combated the institutional autonomy of the Shi'a establishment and persecuted its personnel.

At the same time, it strives to procure the compliance of its authorities, by requiring them to issue fatwa (religious edicts) against its Shi'a enemies. More recently, the newspaper Babil, directed by Saddam's son Uday, has waged a sectarian campaign against the Shi'a. They are referred to by the derogatory term of al-rafidha, the rejectionists, historically used by their detractors such as the Wahhabi.

One article alleged that the mixing of the sexes in some Shi'a religious ceremonies leads to sexual promiscuity, fostered by their ulama in order to enhance their numbers! These campaigns are clearly designed to sharpen sectarian solidarities and crystallise Sunni support. It is a further assault on notions and practices of common citizenship and in favour of communalist identities.

Religiosity is not, however, confined to official rhetoric. Observers have reported a marked rise in the signs of popular religiosity. Over the course of the 20th century, Iraqis may have been sectarian in their allegiances, but they were not particularly pious. The Communist Party, for instance, had some of its most prominent sources of support in Shi'a cities and quarters, and Sunni activists tended more towards pan-Arabism than Islam. Iraq was much less pious than Egypt or even 'secular' Turkey.

It would seem, however, that the disasters that have overtaken the country have fostered a wave of new religious observance of prayer and rituals. It is also reported that there is an upsurge in popular religious practices, such as sufi affiliations and the visitation of tombs. Are these reactions to the insecurity of life and the sense of loss of control over one's fate? Or is it part of the general Islamic wave in the region of piety mixed with a siege mentality of religious nationalism? We will see.

5. Whither civil society?

What are the prospects [14] for a revival of a civil society of active citizens in Iraq? Under the current regime, or a replacement of it by something similar, the prospects are grim. What type of new regime would foster or at least permit the regeneration of an autonomous public life of politics and culture? One clear answer is a democratic, pluralist state under the rule of law. But that would seem Utopian.

If the present regime is displaced [15], then the forces that are likely to emerge are those which are predominantly communal, religious and tribal. There are no credible independent institutions

or associations within the country (though many in exile) that could serve as agents of governance and transformation.

Any agency involved in regime change will probably find it easiest to deal with chieftains and bosses who can deliver, and that is precisely the opposite of a healthy civil society and public sphere in the senses outlined here. Yet, we can see from other examples in the region that regimes which have multiple centres of power, while not being truly democratic, can be conducive for more vital political and cultural fields.

Most Arab countries have unitary and generally authoritarian centres of power. Even when, as in the case of Egypt and Jordan, they have a nominally parliamentary system and a number of political parties, the regime directorate dictates the agenda, with little scope for free play by other agents. In Lebanon and (non-Arab) Iran, there is a (very different) plurality of power centres, some of them under chieftains and bosses. These centres are mostly authoritarian, but the very fact of the multiplicity allows a degree of play in political and cultural fields.

Pre-civil war Lebanon presented such an image: a lively intellectual and cultural life with a multiplicity of actors, but within a political system governed by corrupt and authoritarian bosses. The political and cultural struggles in present-day Iran also reflect the multi-centred regime, in which artists, filmmakers, journalists and philosophers as well as religious dissidents, have some limited room for creativity and play, despite the recurrent harassment and persecution of some.

If regime change in Iraq has a pluralist outcome, as the opposition [16] suggest it may, then, even if it is not democratic, it may entail the revival of some kind of national civil society. Or is this too optimistic?

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