

A History of Iraq

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There is probably no other region in today's world whose domestic and international politics have been more personalised than the Middle East. Not only have absolute leaders dominated the regional political scene for decades, superseding state institutions and personalising the national interest, but quite a few states have been established to satisfy the personal ambitions of local rulers. The independent state of the Hijaz, for instance, was created to reward Hussein Ibn Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, for instigating the 'Arab Revolt' against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, only to be subsumed in the 1920s by Saudi Arabia: yet another personal creation by a local potentate, Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud. The Emirate of Transjordan, latterly the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, was established by the British to placate Sharif Hussein's son, Abdallah, while the formation of the larger and more powerful Iraqi state (in 1921) from the Ottoman *velayets* of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul was designed to compensate Abdallah's younger brother, Faisal, following his expulsion from Syria by the French.

There is, however, another side to the ledger. Middle Eastern rulers are no less the product of their environment than its shapers. Islam's millenarian legacy, the precarious and uncertain nature of Arab nationalism, and the abundance of conflicting loyalties, disputed boundaries, religious, and ethnic and tribal schisms, have all left an indelible mark on ruled and rulers alike.

One of the great virtues of Tripp's book, by far the best and most serious history of Iraq to date, is that it captures so well not simply the consequences of this intricate interrelationship, but also the social and moral worlds in which it exists and thrives. Resisting the simplistic, if fashionable fad of 'writing history from

below', which all too often places an undue emphasis on society's marginal and esoteric aspects to the exclusion of its real driving forces, Tripp has produced a subtle interpretation of Iraq that is at once sensitive to both views from 'above' and 'below', and which casts Iraqi rulers as being forged by their society even as they sought to reforge it.

This, to be sure, is no mean task. For Iraq is a land of rival ambitions and contradictions that make the creation of a unified national narrative a daunting task indeed. It is a country with a glorious imperial past, stretching back thousands of years, and far-reaching dreams for the future, and yet, geopolitically handicapped: virtually landlocked and surrounded by six neighbours, with at least two - Turkey and Iran - larger and irredentist. It is a country that aspires to champion the cause of Arab nationalism while at the same time being, in the words of its first modern ruler, King Faisal I, no more than 'unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities... and prone to anarchy'.⁽¹⁾ It is a land torn by ethnic and religious divisions, a land where the main non-Arab community, the Kurds, has been constantly suppressed, and where the majority of the population, the Shi'ites, have been ruled since the inception of the Iraqi state as an underprivileged class by a minority group, the Sunnis, less than one third their size.

This wide gap between dreams of grandeur and the grim realities of weakness has generated a political legacy of frustration and insecurity, so aptly captured by Tripp's book. Confronted with a roiling domestic cauldron, as well as formidable external challenges, the ruling oligarchy in Iraq - from the monarchy, to the Ba'th party, to Saddam Hussein - has been condemned to a constant rearguard action for political legitimacy and personal survival. The outcome has been the all-too-familiar politics of violence plaguing Iraq for most of the twentieth century.

By way of weaving this troubled national narrative into a unified whole, Tripp focuses on three interrelated factors, denoting different spheres of social and political actions. The first is patrimonialism's extraordinary resilience, and the attendant consequences of this phenomenon for the organisation of power and the relationship between social formations and the forms of state power. Drawing on a wide range of original sources, and writing in crisp prose, Tripp meticulously documents the decisive impact of the networks of patrons and clients throughout Iraqi society on the country's political history, from the people who associated themselves with the Hashemite monarchy in the early years to the groupings now clustered around Saddam's personal rule.

Tripp convincingly argues that given the origins of the Iraqi state, as well as the processes attending its creation, certain social groupings, mainly Sunni Arabs associated with the defunct Ottoman Empire, have always been favoured over others. This has, in turn, allowed them to use the power thus acquired to protect privilege and to give it dimensions of property, status, and position. Yet this has not spared the Sunni community of its own internal rivalries, conflicts, and struggles, which have at times been no less intense than the attempt to exclude the 'other' on the basis of sect, ethnic grouping, gender or economic position. Indeed, as shown by Tripp, there has been much more to this process than the mere jockeying for power and its trappings: it has been inextricably linked with such social developments as the fortunes of 'tribal' politics, as well as the demographic shift from countryside to city and the consequent 'ruralizing' of the political universe.

These processes have been greatly enhanced by the second factor noted by Tripp: the shifting basis of Iraq's political economy, notably the increasing importance of oil revenues and the unprecedented financial power they have delivered into the hands of those at the helm. Yet this development has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has enhanced the autonomy of the state in Iraq. On the other, it has reinforced the particular conceptions of the state held by those who have used these resources to shape the state itself, from the Hashemites to Saddam. Most importantly, the economic foundations of power have augmented the different forms of patrimonialism which have ensured the dependence of the majority of the Iraqi population on the minority controlling the nation's foremost resources.

The third factor is similarly linked to the other two: the prevalence of violence in Iraqi history. To be sure,

any state is to some extent an organisation that disciplines and coerces, with the importance of coercion as a disciplinary means shifting in accordance with the degree of regime openness. Yet even by the unforgiving standards of Middle Eastern politics, Iraqi violence has been a league of its own. When in the summer of 1933 the Iraqi army slaughtered some 3,000 members of the tiny Assyrian community, in response to their demand for ethnic and religious recognition, celebrations were held throughout the country in which 'triumphant arches were set up, decorated with melons stained with blood and with daggers stuck into them [to represent heads of slain Assyrians]'.⁽²⁾ When in July 1958 the Hashemite dynasty, which had ruled Iraq since its inception in 1921, was overthrown by a military coup, headed by General Abd al-Karim Qassem, the mutilated body of the Iraqi regent, Abd al-Ilah, was dragged by a raging mob through the streets of Baghdad before being hung at the gate of the Ministry of Defence. Similarly, Saddam Hussein's ascent to the presidency in July 1979 was accompanied by a horrendous bloodbath, in which hundreds of party officials and military officers, some of whom were close friends and associates, perished.

According to Tripp, this violent legacy has made the armed forces a pre-eminent part of Iraqi society from the onset of the state, thus creating the very conditions which have perpetuated this pre-eminence and forcing would be opponents to operate along very similar lines. No less importantly, the primacy of military force has coupled with the oligarchic nature of Iraqi politics and the massive influx of oil revenues to create dominant narratives marked by powerful, authoritarian leadership, for whom political participation is little more than unquestioning submission. This has in turn faced many Iraqis with the choice between submission and flight: for Assyrians, Kurds, and Yazidis, migration and exile seemed at times to be the only way to escape the pull of the state and the sometimes murderous zeal of those its rulers; so it was for those independently minded intellectuals and artists who would not have their voices numbed. For many Shi'ites, the example of those *mujtahids* who had performed an inner, spiritual migration has been a powerful one, causing them to turn their backs on a political world which had so little to offer them; if they tried to change it, as some have done, the reaction was so harsh that physical flight and exile seemed to be the only safe path before them.

Never have these processes been so pronounced as during the two-and-a-half decades of Saddam's personal rule. In the permanently beleaguered mind of Saddam, politics is a ceaseless struggle for survival. The ultimate goal of staying alive, and in power, justifies all means. Plots lurk around every corner. Nobody is trustworthy. Everybody is an actual or potential enemy. One must remain constantly on the alert, making others cower so that they do not attack, always ready to kill before being killed. 'I know that there are scores of people plotting to kill me', Saddam told a personal guest of his shortly after assuming the presidency in the summer of 1979, 'and this is not difficult to understand. After all, did we not seize power by plotting against our predecessors'? 'However', he added, 'I am far cleverer than they are. I know that they are conspiring to kill me long before they actually start planning to do it. This enables me to get them before they have the faintest chance of striking at me'.⁽³⁾

This stark worldview can be explained in part by Saddam's troublesome childhood, which seldom afforded him the trusting bonds of close, family relationships, but taught him instead the cruel law of the survival of the fittest, a law he was to cherish throughout his entire political career. But to no less an extent his outlook is the product of the ruthless political system in which he has operated, and in which naked force has constituted the sole agent of political change. If anything, Saddam has reinforced certain trends in Iraqi history, building up a formidable apparatus that brooks no opposition and provides no space for political activity other than on terms set by him. In doing so, he has substantially reinforced the social networks of kinship buttressing his regime by using them as channels of reward and punishment, sustaining a certain kind of patrimonial system and strengthening the positions of the designated patriarchal leaders vis-à-vis their followers and tenants. So effective has this process been that, reciprocally, increasing numbers of individuals, far removed from the obvious 'traditional' tribal identity, have sought to associate themselves with the recognised sheikhs of certain tribal groups to benefit from the protection and security this is thought to bring.

At the same time, as aptly noted by Tripp, the networks of patronage which have sustained the regime and the state it has helped to create, have contributed both to its isolation in the region and to the alienation of

large sectors of Iraqi society which have not benefited from its fruits. There is thus a possibility that the apparent conformity of the Iraqi population will endure only as long as the centre holds - and given the key part played in this by the physical survival of one man, that must always be precarious. This is perhaps why Tripp concludes his excellent survey of one of the Middle East's more troubled histories on a rather optimistic note:

The political history of the Iraqi state is a continuing one. However dominant the present order in Iraq has been during the past thirty years and however much it has exerted itself to eliminate possible alternatives, time will erode and destroy it. With its passing new spaces will open up and possibilities will be created for other narratives to assert themselves in the shaping of Iraqi history.

Notes

1. Abd al-Razaq al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-Wizarat al-Iraqiyya, Part 3*, Sidon, Matba'at al-Ifran, 1939, pp. 189-95.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, London, Hutchinson, 1989, p. 169.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography*, New York, The Free Press, 1991, p. 2.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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