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A Path to Peace: Reconciling the Sunni-Shi'a Conflict in Iraq

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in International Relations
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Abstract

The Iraqi state has a long history of division between Sunnis and Shiites. This conflict has often been violent and continues even today. Ultimately, this division dates back to the seventh century after the death of Muhammad. In order to better understand why there is a conflict between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq and not other countries, it is essential to understand the similarities and differences between their ideologies but also how they have been rooted against each other throughout history. Therefore, I begin with a description of the similarities and differences between Sunnis and Shiites to show the common beliefs of both Sunnis and Shiites regarding the Islamic religion and why it is important to respect their differences. Then, it is necessary to determine how the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq began and why it continues today. Lastly, using this knowledge, I will make recommendations to improve the current Iraqi government through a revised consociational democracy model in order to resolve conflict between Sunnis and Shiites.

Executive Summary

Overall, the goal of this project is to determine why the Sunni-Shi'a conflict was created in Iraq and to devise a solution to end the conflict. This question is necessary because there are Muslim countries, such as Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, where Sunnis and Shiites live in peace. Therefore, I wanted to determine why the situation in Iraq is different. First, it is clear that the differences between Sunnis and Shiites are important to Iraqis. They identify with their sects based on religious beliefs and mobilize in their sects to promote their political interests. Their main differences include certain religious beliefs and the role of Islam in society. The most apparent difference in their religious beliefs concerns the succession of the Prophet Muhammad. Shiites felt it should be someone from Muhammad's bloodline, and Sunnis wanted a leader based on merit. In addition, Shiites have more demands for the freedom of their religious practices and for religion's role in society whereas Sunnis tend to be more secular. Their similarities under the main principles of Islam also show their devotion to their sects and why elites are able to influence followers to partake in politics. Understanding these similarities and differences allows for a thorough examination of the causes of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict and to determine a solution that reflects each group's interests.

I argue that the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq was due to colonialism, authoritarian regimes, and U.S. intervention. Despite the fact that Shiites have always been a majority in Iraq, they were oppressed until the end of Saddam Hussein's regime. Overall under colonialism, the British favored the Sunnis because they supported them; they marginalized the Shiites because they opposed them. Later on, authoritarian regimes under the Ba'ath party, especially Saddam Hussein, continued to oppress Shiites because they were the largest threat to their power. Once Saddam Hussein's regime was destroyed by the U.S., the Shiites finally gained proportional power in the government while Sunnis lost a significant amount of their influence and wealth. The new democratic government system reflected a federal, representative democracy which Shiites favored and Sunnis opposed.

Furthermore, the semi-consociational model of government instated by the 2005 Constitution needs to be reformed in order to end the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites. A consociational model allows for grand coalition of all groups in society, proportional representation, a minority veto, and group autonomy. A successful consociational model has reconciled ethnic conflict in South Africa, and I affirm it can do the same for Iraq. By reforming the Constitution and control over the minister of the interior and defense, providing a minority veto, and giving the state control of security forces, the Sunnis will be more comfortable with the new government structure. The Shiites will also maintain their proportional amount of power and autonomy.

Though I do a thorough examination of Iraqi history and the current government system, the Sunni-Shi'a conflict is complex. Despite these ramifications and past experiences, I am optimistic that Sunnis and Shiites can cooperate. By meeting the demands of each group and distributing power in a fair manner, both groups will hopefully feel comfortable with the new government. They will then be able to collaborate and reconcile their differences to create a successful Iraqi state where Sunnis and Shiites live in peace like those in numerous other Muslim countries.

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Advice to Future Honors Students

My biggest advice to any student beginning their first large, independent research project in the social sciences would be to pick a topic about which you are passionate. If you do not enjoy what you are studying, you will not be able to bring out your full potential at the end. This requires more time than anything else you have ever worked on and will certainly become frustrating at times, but if it is something you truly care about, you will not give up. Another piece advice would be to read and do as much research as you can in order to develop your viewpoint. Although you may think you believe one argument, it is important to look at opposition because not only will they give you a well-rounded outlook on your topic, they may even change your opinion. Lastly, never be afraid to ask for help. Everyone around you wants you to succeed; you simply need to reach out to them. Good luck!

Chapter 1

Introduction

When the average person or even academics look at the Middle East, some common ideas come to mind: corruption, violence, terrorism, religious fundamentalism. Although these themes tend to define the conversation around the Middle East, no one can find a clear understanding of events and conflicts in the region without a thorough examination of history. Throughout history, the Middle East has been plagued by foreign intervention and corruption. As an American reflecting on the Middle East, the events of September 11th and the Iraq War will always remain in my memory. American news stations have shown how the war affected the United States, but what about the Iraqi people? From the American perspective, the Iraq War was a campaign against terrorism to preserve U.S. democracy and freedom. On the other hand, in Iraq, the war turned Iraqi society on its head and ignited sectarian violence which had been developing for years. The Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq have seen dictatorships that suppressed their freedoms, but the new democratic government contributes to a whole new set of issues.

Overall, Sunnis and Shiites live in peace in numerous other countries. After looking at the conflict and violence in Iraq, I wondered why Sunni and Shi'a relations in Iraq were different. Therefore, I decided to study the history of Iraq to understand Sunni-Shi'a relations,

how the conflict began, and why it has continued for many years. Once I determined the cause of the conflict, the current feelings between the groups, and understood the current government system, I then devised a solution to the conflict. My hope is that the solution could be a model for other Muslim countries in conflict.

From the beginning, I seek to understand the similarities and differences between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq. Their similarities show their devotion to God and their religion which explains why each group has mobilized within their sect. By understanding why they are different, it proves that a solution must respect each group's unique beliefs. After establishing their similarities and differences, I explain why two groups who ultimately lived in peace became in conflict with each other. In general, the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq was caused by colonialism, authoritarian regimes, and U.S. intervention. Throughout these periods, elites used common beliefs to mobilize their followers along religious lines to promote their political interests; these interests reflected wealth and power. Overall, I argue that the conflict between the Sunnis and Shiites was created due to political reasons. Ultimately, they mobilize in their religious groups to promote their interests whether religious or not.

Since colonialism and the creation of the Iraqi state, the minority Sunnis have controlled the government and wealth of the country. When the U.S. invaded Iraq and created a democracy, Iraq completely changed to reflect its demographics. Clearly, Sunnis felt marginalized and became angry. The new representative government which echoed some aspects of consociational democracy gave the majority Shiites more power than the Sunnis. In turn, sectarian violence broke out after the creation of the 2005 Constitution, and conflict continued into the end of U.S. intervention in 2011.

With an understanding of the history which caused Sunni-Shi'a conflict and the new democratic government, I suggest that a complete and reformed consociational democracy is the best solution to the conflict. I affirm my argument by portraying how consociationalism has worked to placate conflict between ethnic groups in South Africa. By understanding the history and desires of the Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, I feel a lasting solution can be made to ensure peace in the country.

Chapter 2

Sunni and Shi'a Identity in Iraq

In order to establish the central argument that the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites is political, it is first important to understand the similarities and differences between Sunnis and Shiites in general. Their differences are important because they show why Sunnis and Shiites identify as different sects or groups in Iraqi society. These distinctions mobilize both Sunnis and Shiites in their proper groups in the political realm to promote their opinions, their power, and their wealth. In addition, their similarities are important because they show how both groups hold religion in the same regard. Therefore, Islam is a part of everyday life; they interact with their group in religious settings where they discuss other aspects of life including politics. On the other hand, their similarities are also meaningful because they present how Muslims have united during certain periods to oppose foreign intervention. This helps to prove that Sunnis and Shiites can cooperate and live peacefully when they have shared interests. In effect, with the right arrangement, there is hope that the Sunni-Shi'a conflict can be resolved.

First, the differences between Sunnis and Shiites are essential to their identity and create distinct groups in Iraq. These differences seem to be especially important in Iraq as opposed to other Muslim countries. According to Michael Lipka, "A survey of Muslims in 39 countries that

we conducted in 2011 and 2012 found, for example, that 74% of Muslims in Kazakhstan and 56% of Muslims in Indonesia identified themselves as neither Sunni nor Shia, but ‘just a Muslim.’ In Iraq, however, only 5% answered ‘just a Muslim.’”¹ Clearly, Iraqis see their sects as the defining aspect of their religious identity. Therefore, it is important to respect these differences when determining the cause and suggesting solutions to the conflict.

Furthermore, the distinctions that Sunnis and Shiites affiliate with in Iraq are based on differences in some aspects of religious ideology and the role of Islam in society. The main overarching difference between Sunnis and Shiites refers to the successor of the Prophet Muhammad after his death in 632. There were two different beliefs to how the successor should be chosen. One belief was that the successor should be qualified and continue the Prophet’s teachings. The other belief was that it should be someone related to the Prophet. In effect, the first Caliph became Abu Bakr, a friend of Muhammad. Those who believed that the successor should come from Muhammad’s bloodline followed and supported Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. According to Christopher M. Blanchard, “Ali’s follower’s believed that the Prophet Muhammad himself had named Ali as successor and that the status quo was a violation of divine order.”² Due to their unhappiness with the leadership choice, in 656, Ali’s followers murdered the Caliph and put Ali in power. Later, Ali was assassinated and his son killed by Sunni Muslims soldiers.³

In turn, the disagreement over succession and the death of Ali and his son represent a key aspect of Shi’a religious practices. After Ali’s death, Shiites grieved the death of their beloved

¹ Michael Lipka, “The Sunni-Shia divide: Where they live, what they believe and how they view each other,” *Pew Research Center*, June 18, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/18/the-sunni-shia-divide-where-they-live-what-they-believe-and-how-they-view-each-other/>.

² Christopher M. Blanchard, “Islam: Sunnis and Shiites,” *Congressional Research Service*, January 28, 2009, 1.

³ Blanchard, 1.

leader who they truly believe was chosen by Muhammad as the rightful successor. In effect, Shiites believed Ali was the legitimate Caliph. Therefore, their political and religious leaders signify their abilities and blood relation to Muhammad.⁴ Other leaders that became important once Ali's descendants ended are mujtahids and ayatollahs who interpret religious and legal philosophies for the community.⁵ In addition, due to their marginalized status throughout history, Shiites commemorate the death of Ali's son, Hussein every year to teach morals and promote their beliefs. In effect, these events influenced the concept of martyrdom and grieving rituals among Shiites.⁶ In contrast, Sunnis do not take part in these ceremonies. Instead, their everyday religious practices emulate the customs of Muhammad.

In a more contemporary sense relating to religious differences between Sunnis and Shiites, the Shiites have specific recommendations for the role of Islam in Iraq. In 2002, many Shi'a leaders attended a conference in London where they adopted the Declaration of the Shi'a of Iraq. According to Patrick Clawson, the director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the conference included Shiites who were intellectuals, professionals, academics, activists, secular and religious community leaders, and also some representatives from Islamic groups, such as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the al-Dawa Party.⁷ Overall, this declaration expressed the main demands agreed upon by these Shiites from all different parts of society in Iraq.

Clawson reiterates their main concerns which predominantly relate to civil rights and religious autonomy. One main theme among their concerns clearly involves their freedom of

⁴ Blanchard, 4.

⁵ Blanchard, 4.

⁶ BBC, "News," Sunnis and Shia: Islam's ancient schism, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047709> (accessed January 8, 2015).

⁷ Patrick Clawson, *How to Build a New Iraq after Saddam* (Washington D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2002), 36.

religion and religious practices. This theme can be divided into three main sections: freedom of practice, religious education, and the protection and establishment of shrines and institutions.

First, the section of freedom of practice relates to numerous different aspects of life. They would like the freedom to practice their religion in their own mosques and institutions.⁸ In addition, religious leaders must also have the freedom to conduct their meetings how they would like as opposed to facing regulations by the government. Lastly, Shi'a religious dates are important and must be acknowledged by the state as holidays, for instance.

Next, religious education is important to the Shiites. First, they want to be able to create their own books and institutions including independent schools. In addition, they want to be able to teach in their religious institutions without interference.⁹ In regard to national education, they would like to incorporate the Jafari creed, a Shi'a school of jurisprudence, into the curriculum along with other schools of Islamic law already being taught.¹⁰ Lastly, they do not want history lessons to be biased towards Shiites as far as viewing them as violent due to Saddam Hussein's propaganda, so the curriculum must be revised. Finally, religious shrines and institutions are an essential part of Shi'a culture. They would not only like to have the ability to establish their own shrines and institutions but have them be protected as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.¹¹ Overall, these three categories relate to several aspects of religious life for Shiites.

Despite these differences, Sunnis and Shiites are similar in many ways. First, although they identify as different sects, they both believe in the core principles of Islam and are devoted to God. In turn, the foundations of Islam began with the prophet, Muhammad. In 612,

⁸ Clawson, 37.

⁹ Clawson, 37.

¹⁰ Clawson, 38.

¹¹ Clawson, 37.

Muhammad began to preach and gain followers.¹² Muhammad taught his followers that they must believe in one god, Allah, and be completely devoted to him. Muslims were required to pray three times a day, and this prayer was known as the salat.¹³ In addition, Islam was completely concerned with creating a fair and compassionate community or ummah. Therefore, they had to give alms to the poor to remind themselves of the value of their wealth. They would then fast during Ramadan to know the hardships that the poor in society must face each day. Furthermore, the most important part of Arabia at the time was the Kabah shrine in Mecca. Each year Muslims would take a pilgrimage or hajj to Mecca to perform a ceremony around the shrine.¹⁴ Lastly, all violence was prohibited in and near Mecca and assuredly forbidden during the hajj.

Overall, these similarities are important because they show how relevant religion is to the everyday life of both Sunnis and Shiites. Eric Davis of Rutgers University defines religion as, “a system of beliefs based in piety and devotion....To be able to claim membership in a religion, the believer must adhere to a set of principles that define his or her particular creed.”¹⁵

Understanding religion in this way shows how both Sunnis and Shiites adhere to Islam; they follow the same main principles, and in effect, their devotion to their religion is fundamentally the same. Therefore, they both interact with their sects on a daily basis and connect with others based on religion. The devotion and connection to their religious groups creates trust and allows elites to mobilize their followers along religious lines to promote political interests.

¹² Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2002, 4.

¹³ Armstrong, 5.

¹⁴ Armstrong, 10.

¹⁵ Eric Davis, “Reflections on Religion and Politics in Post-Ba’thist Iraq,” *Taarii Newsletter*, Rutgers University: 2008, 13.

One way mobilization is possible is due to interactions within mosques. Historically, even when the first mosque was built, according to Karen Armstrong, "...Muslims met to discuss all the concerns of the ummah — social, political and military as well as religious."¹⁶ Furthermore, all different kinds of activities are performed in the mosque, not only religious ceremonies. When Muslims go to the mosque to practice their religion, their conversations do not necessarily focus on religion. Mosques have become a place to spread new ideas and information. Because they all connect based on similar beliefs and belong to the same group, they are able to discuss how to better their group in society. They ultimately favor their group in both the social and political spheres in order to assert their beliefs. This foreshadows how social interaction due to religion and in religious settings can become a way to mobilize for political reasons which is key to the conflict in Iraq.

Although I argue that devotion to a religion can cause followers to mobilize for political reasons, this does not mean to say that political participation is not a mandatory aspect of religion in Iraq. Davis reiterates that allegiance to a religion does not require the adherent to engage in politics.¹⁷ Therefore, Sunni and Shi'a Islam or Islam in general does not have differing views on political participation; each group chooses to assert their interests for political reasons, not due to religious belief. Elites often use the support of their followers to evoke their religious feelings in order to rally for their interests which are based on wealth and power.

Not only are similarities between Sunnis and Shiites important to show their devotion to their group, their similarities have also been a force that has united Sunnis and Shiites during certain periods. Two important events stand out in Iraqi history. The first was during the 1920

¹⁶ Armstrong, 14.

¹⁷ Davis, 13.

revolution against the British. The revolt began because the British captured a prominent tribal leader in the South, but Iraqis were already angered by the declaration of a British mandate over Iraq. Both Sunnis and Shiites joined to oppose the British and foreign control. Sherko Kirmanj gives specific examples of cooperation between Sunnis and Shiites during the revolution: “The signs of convergence were magnified during the month of Ramadan when the Shiites attended Sunni ceremonies of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Sunnis attended the commemoration of the killing of Imam Hussein.”¹⁸ By showing respect for each other and collaborating with each other during this time, it is possible for Sunnis and Shiites to come together despite their religious differences. Consequently, their political interests were the same because they both opposed a foreign power that was neither Muslim nor Arab. Although this nationalist sentiment did not last, it presents an example of how Sunnis and Shiites could work together under the right conditions. For this reason, I feel my later suggestions for a resolution will be attainable.

Another example of cooperation and collaboration between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq was to oppose Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. According to Kirmanj, during the war, 80 percent of the soldiers and 20 percent of the officers in the military during the Iran-Iraq War were Shiites.¹⁹ This is important because the Sunnis controlled the military, but the Shiites were a significant part of the military during the war. Once again, this sense of nationalism did not last, but I argue that these events illustrate that Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq can reconcile their differences for a common cause or to better their country.

¹⁸ Sherko Kirmanj, *Identity and Nation in Iraq* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner Publishers, Inc., 2013), 27.

¹⁹ Kirmanj, 144.

After looking at the similarities and differences between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, I would like to make two points. First, Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq are different based on their religious beliefs, but their differences are not the cause of the conflict between the two groups. The cause of conflict is due to colonial and authoritarian regimes that favored their supporters and marginalized their opposition. In Iraq, the opposition tended to be Shiites. That is why the Shiites were denied power and wealth throughout history despite being a majority. Secondly, religious groups are not required to participate in politics, but they mobilize within religious groups due to shared beliefs and constant interaction. Elites then have the opportunity to foster religious feelings to rally their supporters to stand behind them. Elites mainly want power and wealth.

Furthermore, I have presented why the similarities and differences among Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq are necessary for understanding the conflict. When trying to find a solution to the conflict, it is important to first respect their differences and the autonomy of each group. Secondly, it is also essential to understand that there is a possibility for cooperation. Therefore, the solution can be a system where each group is represented with some autonomy. Because there is hope that they can collaborate, drastic measures like division into two states is not necessary.

Now that we understand the necessary aspects of Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, the next chapter will determine why there is conflict between the groups in Iraq as opposed to other countries where they live in peace. In order to show the causes of the conflict, we will look at the effects of colonialism by the British and the effects of authoritarian regimes, especially Saddam Hussein, on Sunni-Shi'a relations. After portraying the development of the Sunni-Shi'a

conflict in Iraq, we will look for a solution that as stated above respects the differences of both communities but also allows them to cooperate based on common interests.

Chapter 3

Evolution of the Sunni-Shi'a Conflict in Iraq

Although the Sunni-Shi'a divide dates back hundreds of years ago, there remains conflict between the groups in the Middle East today, especially in Iraq. Throughout history, the Sunnis had most of the power and wealth while Shiites were oppressed and marginalized. This continued until the end of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. After the United States' invasion, a new democratic government was created, but Sunnis and Shiites continued to fight. In 2006, one of the holiest Shi'a shrines was bombed by Al-Qaeda and reaffirmed tensions against Sunnis.²⁰ Some have seen the violence and tensions after this time as a civil war. In effect, throughout the entire U.S. occupation until 2011 and even after, violence among Sunnis and Shiites continues to plague the country and prevent progress. For instance, in March 2015 alone 927 civilian deaths were recorded.²¹ Why has this violence and conflict continued for so many years? In order to answer this question, we must determine the causes of tension between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq. Only then can we understand how to reconcile this conflict and bring peace to the country.

²⁰ BBC, "News," Timeline: Iraq after Saddam, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4192189.stm (accessed February 7, 2015).

²¹ Iraq Body Count, "Database," Documented Civilian Deaths from Violence, <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> (accessed April 9, 2015).

In general, Iraq is unlike many Muslim countries in the Middle East. Overall, there are more Sunni Muslims than Shi'a Muslims around the world. According to the Pew Research Center, of the 1.6 billion Muslims around the world, 85% are Sunni and only 15% are Shi'a.²² The case in Iraq is the opposite. The Pew Research Center reports that 65% of Muslims in Iraq are Shi'a while only 35% are Sunni.²³ It is important to remember these demographics as we discuss the tensions between these groups over history. Shiites have always been a majority in Iraq but were never treated as so until the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime by the United States. Shi'a marginalization has been the main complaint of Shiites throughout history. The oppression of the majority Shiites is apparent in the next section.

The Effects of Colonial Rule

Like in many other countries, colonialism shaped the politics and social structures of Iraq. The British occupation of Iraq deepened Sunni-Shi'a divisions and left the country unstable and in turmoil. The British favored the Sunnis while ultimately oppressing the Shiites. After The British granted Iraq independence, they continued their favoritism by placing a Sunni Muslim in power. This act set the stage for the continuation of Sunni favoritism and Shi'a oppression throughout the 20th century.

During the 19th century, Iraq gained international attention due to the opening of the Suez Canal. Despite economic changes from the canal, Iraq remained underdeveloped and weak. The British became interested in Iraq for these reasons, especially its location. Consequently, the

²² Council on Foreign Relations, "The Sunni-Shia Divide," <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/#flashpoints> (accessed February 10, 2015).

²³ Council on Foreign Relations.

British occupied Iraq from 1920 until 1932. They created the modern state of Iraq and the boundaries we know today. Overall, Judith Yaphe states what she believes were the three main setbacks during the occupation. First, the British were supposed to prepare Iraq for independence but could not agree on the terms that should be met or when this would occur. Second, there was a demand to cut back on financial and military expenses in Iraq. Lastly, a nationalist movement began in Iraq to end the British occupation.²⁴

Due to a popular sentiment against British intervention, a revolt of both Sunnis and Shiites occurred in 1920. Because of the amount of citizens involved, they had a significantly hard time stopping the rebellion. In fact, the rebellion lasted for nearly six months. In order to prevent this kind of joint activity from occurring again, the British pitted the Sunnis and Shiites against each other. Although many Sunnis collaborated with Shiites during the revolt, there were Sunnis who supported the British. For example, the largest Sunni political alignment during this period, the al-‘Ahd Association “approached the British and demonstrated a willingness to provide assistance for bringing security and settlement to the rebellious areas.”²⁵ Because the majority of Shiites continuously opposed British occupation, the British had a better relationship with the Sunnis. In return, the British gave Sunnis the most power in the government. There were several reasons that contributed to this distribution of power. According to Ofra Bengio, the British realized that the Sunnis would be dependent on and submit to them due to their minority representation in Iraq.²⁶ In addition, the Shiites were also lacking in political experience and education due to their marginalization during Ottoman control, so the Sunnis were better qualified.

²⁴ Mark Gasiorowski, David Long, & Bernard Reich, eds., *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014), 126.

²⁵ Kirmanj, 28.

²⁶ Kirmanj, 33.

Besides excluding Shiites from power, the British put restrictions on numerous parts of Shi'a life. Their first goal was to break ties between Iranian and Iraqi Shiites by changing immigration laws and deporting Iranian Shiites who opposed British rule. Other ways the British oppressed the Shi'a majority was by controlling the incomes of clergy and placing Shi'a educational institutions under state control.²⁷ Therefore, Shiites now had less political influence than Sunnis in Iraq and were under the control of a state that favored the Sunnis.

Overall, the most devastating restriction that the Shiites encountered was a lack of access to higher education. During the 1920's, a Syrian Sunni Arab also installed by the British, Sati' al-Husri was given the task of reforming the education system. His reforms focused on pan-Arabism in hopes of uniting Iraqis through education. However, his reforms did not consider the differences among Arabs living in Iraq, especially the educational ideologies of the Shiites. According to Kirmanj, "The Shiite camp favored a decentralized educational system that would enable them to teach aspects of their local identity and values."²⁸ In effect, al-Husri ignored their demands and maintained the authority of the central government. Not only were the Shiites unhappy with the centralized education system of which they had no control, the Sunnis also prevented the Shiites from obtaining higher education opportunities which in effect, prevented Shiites from obtaining the qualifications necessary to be government officials. In particular, al-Husri prevented the construction of universities in Shi'a areas because they could not afford to travel away from home to attend a university. Kirmanj argues that al-Husri's motives were to "maintain the dominance of the Sunnis as the sole political and intellectual elite..."²⁹ Therefore,

²⁷T. Rajamoorthy, "Deceit and Duplicity," *Third World Resurgence*, March-April 2003, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/169/36404.html>.

²⁸ Kirmanj, 53.

²⁹ Kirmanj, 53.

because Shiites could not obtain the proper education to have positions in the government, they lacked proper government representation and power.

Not only were the Shiites denied power in the government, the British also placed the military under Sunni control. Sunni domination of the military was clear because mostly all of the officers were Sunnis.³⁰ In turn, the Shiites feared that the Sunnis would take advantage of their command against Shi'a communities. The Shiites also opposed a law that required all men to serve in the military.³¹ This law passed, despite opposition from the Shiites, further exploiting the Shiites and placing Shi'a soldiers under the Sunni officers' control. In sum, the British helped the Sunnis to gain the most power in society while marginalizing the Shiites in the political, military, and educational spheres.

It is clear that Iraq was weak enough to be taken advantage of during this time in order to exploit the differences between the Sunnis and Shiites. The British used their power to favor the Sunnis who supported them while oppressing the Shiites. These actions caused resentment between the dominant Sunnis and the Shiites which deepened the division between the groups. Once the British decided that direct rule was too costly, they found a way to keep some power and influence over Iraq but caused many issues in the process including worsening sectarian conflict. The British indirectly ruled and created a monarchy. Overall, the most significant step the British took to put Sunnis and Shiites in opposition of each other was to place a Sunni Muslim, Amir Faysal in power. In order to assert their ubiquitous power, the British wrote the constitution and created several treaties to outline their role as protectors in exchange for bases. The army and the government were dominated by Sunni Arabs and clearly favored them with

³⁰ Kirmanj, 55.

³¹ Kirmanj, 55.

economic privileges. Therefore, the Shiites rebelled, and in 1932, the British ended the occupation.

Even more, it is apparent now that religion was used to unite groups of citizens in Iraq. In the end, Sunnis and Shiites were not turned against each other due to religious beliefs but because of the competition created between them by the British in regard to governmental representation, educational opportunities, wealth, and political power. The British reinforced this trend when they left by placing the Sunnis in power. Rajamoorthy asserts, “It was the British, in their drive to undermine the power of the Shi’ite majority, who fashioned and designed the modern Iraqi state with the entrenched Sunni minority at its helm.”³² In effect, the Sunnis and Shiites used the unification of their respective groups to try and benefit their own interests, but these interests were ultimately in regard to power, jobs, and wealth, not religious beliefs.

Constitutional Monarchy to Ba’ath Party Rule

In 1958, the monarchy ultimately ended due to a revolution led by the Free Officers Movement. Abd al-Karim al-Qasim came to power with support from the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). The ICP had gained a significant following from the Shi’a community because it attracted poor and disenfranchised groups.³³ Although Shiites joined the ICP, the party operated in a secular manner. In fact, according to the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, “Despite suffering religious discrimination, most Shia movements for

³² Rajamoorthy.

³³ Rajamoorthy.

power have been secular with socialist, democratic, or nationalistic tendencies.”³⁴ In opposition to the ICP, the Sunni dominated Ba’ath party became popular. Consequently, these opposition groups once again represented the division along political lines between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq.

Furthermore, the republican government of Qasim began in 1958. These years were marked by instability and economic decline. Iraq became friendly with the Soviet Union which created tensions with the West. Clearly, the United States was uneasy about this relationship. In 1963, with the help of the United States the government was overthrown by the Ba’ath party which was overthrown again a few months later. Consequently, this coup did not discriminate against Shiites for religious reasons but due to their communist political beliefs. By bringing the Ba’ath to power, the United States consequently favored mostly Sunni Muslims.

In 1968, the Ba’ath party came to power again and removed all non-Ba’athist leaders from the government in turn removing Shiites. The President was Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and the Revolutionary Command Council vice-chairman was Saddam Hussein. In 1970, they created an interim constitution with a socialist economy. During the first decade of Ba’ath rule, social and economic development expanded and there was an increase in oil revenue which led to stability. The government distributed land to all peasants along with education and health services to rural areas. More industry was established and the military began to develop chemical and nuclear weapons.

Despite these improvements, the Ba’ath continued to do everything in their power to prevent the Shiites from mobilizing against the regime because the Shiites were their strongest

³⁴ Political Economy Research Institute, “Iraq (Shia) (1979-1998),” *Modern Conflicts: Conflict Profile*, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2015.

opposition. During the time after the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath came to power, many Shiites joined leftist parties and looked to religious leaders for support. Within these groups, they could express their frustrations with the regime. In turn, this led to the rise of the al-Dawah Party in 1970's which called for an Islamic state in Iraq.³⁵ Political protests by the party led to the death and execution of Shiites. Due to the al-Dawah Party and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Ba'ath intimidated opposition which included mostly Shiites.

In this case, religion can serve as communal solidarity when a group feels threatened. Consequently, religion becomes a sense of comfort and security for the group. The Shi'a community in Iraq during the Ba'ath era and leading up to the Iran-Iraq war is a good example. Many Shiites were members of secular political parties that had all disappeared.³⁶ They then began to assemble with Shi'a religious leaders. Therefore, religion was a constant in an unfair and continuously unstable society. For Shiites, religious institutions and leaders became a way to oppose the Ba'ath government and protect the Shi'ites from political persecution.

In order to keep the Shiites weak and unable to challenge the regime, the Ba'ath dismantled the new resurgence of religious unification. Although the Shiites came together as a religious sect, their goals for consolidation were to assert their political rights. The Ba'ath represented a secular regime whereas those in the al-Dawah Party wanted an Islamic State. This was a matter of governmental ideology and how the government should be run, not having to do with religious differences between Sunnis and Shiites. Furthermore, according to Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, the Ba'ath were afraid of al-Dawah because it brought together

³⁵ Joseph A. Kechichian, "Saddam's legacy of sectarian division in Iraq," *Global Post*, March 20 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/iraq/130320/saddam-hussein-legacy-sectarian-division-iraq>.

³⁶ Davis, 14.

the Iraqi Shi'a religious establishment, the hawza, and the Iraqi Shi'a masses who could take part in political activity against the regime.³⁷ The unification of the hawza and all Shiites created a strong force of opposition against the Ba'ath which they would not tolerate. Attempts to isolate the hawza and the masses are one of the main reasons why Shiites were never able to gain power; the regime did everything they could to prevent an oppositional uprising including resorting to violence.

Subsequently, few Shi'a leaders succeeded in uniting the Shi'a masses with the hawza. During the 1970's, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was one leader who did succeed. In effect, the Ba'ath took action and began to oppress the Shiites by closing religious schools, canceling religious media, and arresting Shi'a leaders.³⁸ They even prohibited religious ceremonies. These actions were political strategies not necessarily only targeted at Shiites because religious schools and media represented Islam in general. The Ba'ath simply wanted to prevent Shiites from interacting with each other in public and spreading any ideas through the media. In addition, al-Sadr's influence was political because he sought to unite all Muslims against the regime. Before he was killed, he said, "It is necessary to assume a fighting position... I have spent this existence for the sake of Shi'i and Sunni equally in that I defended the message that unites them and the creed that embraced them in a body."³⁹ Therefore, even a leader who was famous for being a Shiite proved that his motives were political to fight the unjust Ba'ath regime. He did not distinguish between Sunni and Shi'a religious beliefs or discriminate against Sunnis for religious reasons.

³⁷ Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Trade, 2005), 123.

³⁸ Anderson and Stansfield, 124.

³⁹ Anderson and Stansfield, 126.

The Saddam Years

After a significant period of Ba'ath rule, it was clear that the Shiites were marginalized in Iraqi society. Because Saddam Hussein as a Sunni Muslim was a key actor in the Ba'ath government for many years, it is not surprising that he continued this discrimination against Shiites when he came to power. Consequently, in 1979, Saddam basically placed himself in power by announcing the resignation of Bakr and created a dictatorship that lasted until 2003. He suppressed any organized activity that was not under his control and favored his friends, his family, and his sect as a Sunni Arab. He placed his family and friends in positions of power without regard to their qualifications. Because the Shiites were a large opposition to Saddam, they faced discrimination in the economy as well as in regard to their religious freedoms including rituals, publications, and institutions.⁴⁰

One of the most significant events during his regime that highlighted the struggle between Sunnis and Shiites was the Iran-Iraq War. In 1980, Iran tried to help the unhappy Shiites and Kurds overthrow Saddam. Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran called for an Iraqi Shi'a revolution in Iraq to overthrow the Ba'ath and Saddam.⁴¹ Without a doubt, the Shiites were oppressed by the Ba'ath and wanted power in the government. Saddam felt that the threat from Iran and the Shiites were growing and wanted to prevent any chance of their success. Overall, Saddam also felt that Iran was weak and wanted one of their oil-rich regions, so he went to war. Although Saddam clearly favored Sunnis throughout the beginning of his regime, he looked for ways to gain the support of Shiites during the Iran-Iraq War. According to Kechichian, in order

⁴⁰ Kirmanj, 146.

⁴¹ Political Economy Research Institute.

to strengthen national identity, he emphasized their Arab identity instead of sectarian divisions. He also gave resources to Shi'a areas.⁴² These tactics were simply to help win the war and did not reflect the future actions of Saddam. As discussed earlier, the Sunnis and Shiites united during the Iran-Iraq War, but this bond did not last. Although the Sunnis and Shiites fought for a common cause, the underlying issues behind their conflict were not resolved due to the war. Saddam continued to favor the Sunnis after the war and marginalize Shiites who opposed his regime.

Unfortunately, the war lasted eight years and took a toll on the country and on the Iraqi people. First, the economy was a wreck. Iraq accrued around \$100 billion worth of debt from countries around the world.⁴³ In addition, its oil facilities were destroyed, and they could not partake in trade. Overall, Iraq's infrastructure was destroyed. Many became unemployed because the army had grown so large during the war. Saddam also could not give financial rewards to his allies to his lack of finances. Anderson and Stansfield assert that these rewards were "essential to the smooth functioning of the system."⁴⁴ Therefore, to further his interests, Saddam sought to exploit others for money, especially Kuwait. When Kuwait did not cooperate, he invaded. In effect, the United Nations (UN) then placed an oil embargo on Iraq and sanctions on imports. The U.S. also stepped in beginning the Gulf War and fought Iraq causing them to retreat from Kuwait within one hundred hours.⁴⁵

After the Gulf War, the Shiites and Kurds attempted to revolt, but did not coordinate well. Saddam sent his army to suppress the rebellion which left about 60,000 Shiites dead and

⁴² Kechichian.

⁴³ Anderson and Stansfield, 83.

⁴⁴ Anderson and Stansfield, 85.

⁴⁵ Gasiorowski et al., 131.

two million refugees in surrounding countries, according to Yaphe.⁴⁶ Saddam used these uprisings to strengthen his political power. He convinced Sunnis that the Shi'a revolts were acts of fundamentalism. Andrew Cockburn of *Smithsonian Magazine* reports, "I have heard similar stories from Iraqi's, who also point out that direct clashes between the two communities [Sunnis and Shiites] has inevitably been orchestrated by rulers—whether kings or Saddam Hussein—for political, not religious reasons."⁴⁷ This is one method of politicizing religion where Davis states that leaders may use faith in political action in order to create unity in the group or as a method of opposing others. In this case, the political goals would come first, and the leaders would then use religious ideas to mobilize.⁴⁸

Moreover, it is unfortunate that the Sunni-Shi'a unity established to fight against Iran in the Iran-Iraq War did not last due to Saddam's corruption and fear of losing power. These events uncover the harsh reality of sectarianism in Iraq because Saddam once again rallied the Sunnis against a predominantly Shi'a revolt by using propaganda to characterize them as violent heretics and by placing all responsibility for the death of Sunnis on the Shiites. Anderson and Stansfield agree that the continuous conflict between Sunnis and Shiites is not religious: "The core problems are historical and political, not doctrinal."⁴⁹ As I have shown, although the Sunnis and Shiites have different religious beliefs, colonialism and corrupt leaders ignited the conflict between them; they lived separately and mostly in peace before colonialism created modern day Iraq. Undoubtedly, the trend throughout history always placed the Sunnis in power and the Shiites under their control. Anderson and Stansfield assert that the hierarchy of power since the

⁴⁶ Gasiorowski et al., 133.

⁴⁷ Andrew Cockburn, "Iraq's Oppressed Majority," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2003, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/iraqs-oppressed-majority-95250996/?no-ist>.

⁴⁸ Davis, 13.

⁴⁹ Anderson and Stansfield, 109.

creation of Iraq was the main reason for Shi'a rebellion.⁵⁰ The Shiites lacked power and rights; therefore, the only way to obtain their desires under an oppressive dictator like Saddam was to rebel in hopes of making a change.

After the revolts, Iraq continued to hurt economically because Saddam would not adhere to the ceasefire and the elimination of their weapons of mass destruction asserted by the UN; therefore, the sanctions and oil embargo continued. He then reinstated tribal law and authority and favored those tribal leaders while punishing those he believed to have betrayed him. Next, the Second Gulf War then left Iraq isolated and with a severely bad economy. Saddam's friends and family were the only ones to benefit. Others suffered from low salaries, high inflation, and an unfair political and economic system.

Overall, the Ba'ath and Saddam's regime reinforced sectarian conflict and social and political unrest in Iraq. According to Yaphe, Ba'athism "provided a secular nationalist identity and an ideology based on principles of Arab unity and vague theories of economic and social justice. More importantly, it provided the opportunity to compete on a more equal basis without the advantage or stigma of ethnic, tribal, or sectarian ties."⁵¹ Clearly, Saddam did not adhere to this dogma. Throughout Saddam's time in power, he fought against Shi'a groups for opposing his power and to stop Shi'a rebels in the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIRI). The only time he treated Shiites fairly was during the Iran-Iraq war to gain their favor. In contrast, after the war throughout the 1990's, Saddam destroyed Shi'a land and villages and attacked Shi'a civilians. Shiites were angry and rioted; police subsequently imprisoned and killed them for their actions. Many Shiites were also forcibly relocated by Iraqi forces.

⁵⁰ Anderson and Stansfield, 110.

⁵¹ Gasiorowski et al., 135.

In short, the harsh treatment of the Shiites by Saddam was not strictly religiously motivated. Saddam believed fundamentalists challenged his authority, so he did not want them to be able to mobilize to create a political opposition against him. In general, there were Shiites involved in his regime who received benefits, but ultimately, he opposed the Shiites because a significant number of them opposed and threatened his regime. Although much of the opposition including the SCIRI wanted an Islamic state, Saddam fought against them for political reasons. They did not support his regime, and he wanted to eliminate any opposition to his power for fear that they would try to overthrow him. He attacked Shi'a areas because opposition groups resided there, and those Shi'a groups were known for opposing his regime. Therefore, the Shiites were harshly punished and exploited in order to assert Saddam's political power.

As a result, Saddam's actions left Shiites in squalor and without civil services and institutions in the South. Instead, Shiites received support and services from religious institutions. Once again, the hawza and Shi'a masses were united, and Saddam would not tolerate a threat to his regime. According to Anderson and Stansfield, Saddam attempted to gain the Shiites' favor, but his tactics failed in the long run.⁵² In turn, Saddam resorted to killing the key Shi'a leader of the movement, Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr, once again preventing the Shiites from uniting against his regime and gaining political power.

Another example that shows how Saddam's discrimination against Shiites is not religiously motivated is because there were Shi'a members in his party, although most members were from a similar background to Saddam. Those with membership in Saddam's party benefited from education, jobs, higher salaries, and security. These people also held positions of power and asserted their self-interests. Other groups besides the Shiites, such as the Kurds and

⁵² Anderson and Stansfield, 132.

Christians, joined the party to protect their families or to serve their military duties but never gained much power. The Ba'ath party ultimately came to represent an elitist group with a Sunni Arab identity and for the fortunate, a way to wealth and upward mobility. There was no denying that although Saddam's unequal treatment of Shiites was not centered on religion, he continued to discriminate against the Shi'a population because they were the strongest opposition to his power. He ultimately left the Iraqi people with a poor and unequal society which would continue to affect their lives for years after.

Overall, the effects of Saddam Hussein's corruption on the Iraqi people would not soon be forgotten. He was an oppressive dictator who would do anything to assert his power. He was not afraid to imprison or even execute anyone who tried to oppose him. He killed thousands of his own citizens to make sure he crushed all opposition. Most of those that were killed were Shiites because they were the main group that openly criticized him. In effect, he created a society full of hatred and fear that caused the global community to take notice. According to Anderson and Stansfield, "The underlying social and political order in Iraq became more fragmented and dysfunctional."⁵³ The sectarian divisions he exacerbated during his regime would take on a new dynamic as the United States took control and established a democratic government in Iraq.

Iraq under U.S. Occupation

Furthermore, the U.S. wanted a regime change in Iraq after the September 11th attacks and the fall of the Taliban. They believed that Iraq supported al-Qaeda and planned to make

⁵³ Anderson and Stansfield, 9.

nuclear weapons. The U.S. felt that Iraq could set an example for the rest of the Middle East with a democratic government. Yaphe states four goals for the U.S. in Iraq. First, they wanted all Weapons of Mass Destruction sites and programs destroyed. Second, they wanted to get rid of all Ba'athist influence. Third, they would create democratic political institutions. Lastly, they would restore civil society and domestic security.⁵⁴ When the U.S. began de-Ba'athification, they banned all Ba'ath officials and dissolved the Iraqi army. In effect, there was mass unemployment which mainly affected Sunni Arabs. This in turn also hurt the education, security, and healthcare systems because many teachers, journalists, and medical personnel had joined the Ba'ath party to obtain employment opportunities.⁵⁵ The new democratic government that was instated favored the Shiites and further minimized Sunni power while aggravating sectarianism once again.

From the beginning of intervention in Iraq, the U.S. set the stage for a sectarian conflict. Through the de-Ba'athification process, they removed all Ba'ath leaders from the government which also meant removing mostly Sunnis from government positions. In addition, the U.S. dissolved the Iraqi army which had also been dominated by Sunnis. These sudden changes caused anger and unemployment, igniting Sunni opposition to the democratization process. Kirmanj agrees that "...the problem with the removal of the Ba'athists was that the Sunnis were abruptly marginalized – something that had never been done before."⁵⁶ Sunnis had always had prominent power in government institutions, and now, they found themselves treated as a minority. In fact, the U.S. even created the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) which represented the significant communities in Iraq. It was made up of thirteen Shiites, five Sunnis, five Kurds,

⁵⁴ Gasiorowski et al., 135

⁵⁵ Gasiorowski et al., 134.

⁵⁶ Kirmanj, 195.

one Turkmen, and one Chaldo-Assyrian.⁵⁷ Clearly, the U.S. distinguished between groups based on religion and ethnicity but also took into consideration their proportion in society.

In 2004, the U.S. created the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) which would set the stage for continued sectarian conflict throughout the establishment of the new Iraqi government and for years to come. The main task of IIG was to hold elections. They succeeded by holding an election in January 2005 for the Transitional National Assembly that would create the constitution. This election contributed to Sunni marginalization for two reasons. First, Sunnis boycotted the election which resulted in a small amount of Sunni seats in parliament. Of the 275 seats, Shiites won 146 seats while Sunnis only won six.⁵⁸ Therefore, the Sunnis lacked even proportional representation and influence in the government. The second way this election contributed to Sunni marginalization was because the Sunnis were not well-represented in parliament, they did not have much influence over the creation of the Constitution that would shape their government and their lives. In effect, most Sunnis voted against the Constitution which was adopted in October 2005.

Overall, the Iraqi Constitution created a republican, parliamentary democracy. It also acknowledged the different nationalities, religions, and sects in Iraq. In December 2005, another set of elections were held where Shiites won 128 seats out of 275, and Sunnis won 58.⁵⁹ Clearly, the elections results reflected the minority status of Sunnis in Iraq. Furthermore, in 2005, a Kurd, Jalal Talabani became president. Then, in 2006, a cabinet was created that had representatives from the main ethnic and sectarian communities where a Shiite from the Shi'a

⁵⁷ Kirmanj, 194.

⁵⁸ Kirmanj, 198.

⁵⁹ Kirmanj, 199.

dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), Nouri al-Maliki became prime minister and a Sunni, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, became speaker of the parliament.

After the 2005 elections, there were differing opinions on the new government by Sunnis and Shiites. Overall, Shiites were happier than Sunnis. 89% of Shiites saw the elections as free and fair where 94% of Sunnis thought the election was not free and fair.⁶⁰ In addition, Shiites were also more hopeful for the new government. 84% of Shiites said they thought Iraq was headed in the right direction, and 93% of Sunnis thought Iraq was headed in the wrong direction.⁶¹ Certainly, these extreme disagreements were the result of the proportionality of representation in the government after 2005. Unfortunately, Sunni disapproval would continue due to the continuation of these trends in future elections.

Consequently, the trends of a Shi'a prime minister and a Sunni speaker of parliament continued into the 2010 elections. al-Maliki remained prime minister and another Sunni, Usama al-Nujaifi became speaker of the parliament. In turn, al-Maliki was not only prime minister but additionally chief of the military. He never appointed the minister of defense or of the interior, so he also took on those roles.⁶² Therefore, the Shiites had even more power in the government. According to Kirmanj, "Though the cabinet was supposed to be a national unity government, al-Maliki simply excluded all other political groups from decision-making responsibilities related to strategic and security issues."⁶³ These trends after 2003 created animosity towards the Shiites and the U.S. which was the cause of violence and armed conflict.

⁶⁰ Anthony Cordesman, *Iraq's Insurgency and the Road to Civil Conflict: Volume 1* (Westport: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008), 224.

⁶¹ Cordesman, 224.

⁶² Kirmanj, 203.

⁶³ Kirmanj, 203.

Without a doubt, the Sunnis were unhappy with their loss of power due to U.S. intervention and the creation of a new government. Sunni insurgents began to use violence against Shiites, and Shiites retaliated. Sunni extremists thought they could regain their power through violence and fear.⁶⁴ Because the Shiites controlled the police force, they were able to launch death squads against the Sunni insurgents. Al-Qaeda, which includes mostly Sunnis, even contributed to the sectarian conflict by bombing a famous Shi'a shrine in 2006. Ultimately, this violence led to many casualties and displacement. Over two million Iraqis were displaced, and over 100,000 Iraqis were killed by 2012. These deaths were mostly from sectarian violence and not al-Qaeda as was the common belief.⁶⁵ Although violence and deaths lessened by 2009, the reason for this decrease is unclear. Some possible reasons for the decrease are that groups were eventually separated by walls or due to ethnic cleansing of one group which curbed conflict.⁶⁶

Furthermore, this violence was not helpful in creating a successful government. Besides the ongoing violence that affected both Sunnis and Shiites, elections continued to reflect sectarian conflict. After the 2005 election, Sunnis had significantly less representation in the parliament and power in the government. Although some argue that Sunnis and Shiites were beginning to group into and support secular political parties by the 2010 election, there was not a significant change. Kirmanj states, "While publicly all Iraqi politicians denounce sectarianism and claim Iraqi patriotism, a close look at the 2010 election reveals that the pattern of voting only slightly shifted, as most Iraqis continued to vote according to sectarian or ethnic identity."⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Kirmanj, 196.

⁶⁵ Kirmanj, 197.

⁶⁶ Kirmanj, 198.

⁶⁷ Kirmanj, 204.

Consequently, these sectarian tensions were created by trends throughout history and reinforced by U.S. intervention. The Sunnis were always in power and thus wealthier than the Shiites. The main concern that these challenges bring to light is if democracy is actually possible in Iraq. The United States resorted to extreme measures to ensure Iraq would be the model of democracy in the Middle East, but maybe their goals are unrealistic. In the next part of this essay, I will assess why the representative democratic government structure created by the 2005 Constitution was unsuccessful. I will argue why a complete consociational democracy is a favorable solution. I assert this model is the best option for Iraq and is a resolution to the longstanding sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shiites.

Chapter 4

Resolving the Sunni-Shi'a Divide in Iraq

Before I make my recommendations for a successful Iraqi state, it is important to define the context and the specific focus of these suggestions. First, although the Kurds play an essential role in Iraqi life and politics, these recommendations will solely focus on the Sunnis and Shiites and their unique relationship. As we have seen, the Sunnis and Shiites have a particular history directly related to religion. The Kurds, on the other hand, represent an ethnic conflict which requires a different kind of analysis. Secondly, my suggestions will begin after the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003 and how the government could have been better constructed at this time. I will take into consideration how the subsequent government was unsuccessful and refute these methods with a consociational democracy structure. Lastly, due to the continued development of the civil war in Syria and its effects on Iraq, I will not consider these events in my solution. Rather, I am solely focused on creating a governmental structure to better the domestic relationship between Sunnis and Shiites.

Until the American overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the state of Iraq was always controlled by either foreign powers or oppressive, authoritarian regimes. Every governmental structure was overwhelmingly dominated by Sunni Muslims. Accordingly, Shi'a Muslims were

discriminated against and subjugated since the creation of Iraq. Sunni-Shi'a tensions were exploited by corrupt leaders, especially Saddam Hussein. These measures deepened the sectarian divide and created a norm of Sunni dominance in Iraq. Once the Americans instated a democracy in Iraq, everything changed. The majority Shiites gained power and wealth denied to them for centuries, and the Sunni minority relinquished their domination over Iraq.

Furthermore the democratization process of the government after 2003 created many challenges to democracy. Overall, the government began to benefit the Shiites because they are the majority. According to the State Department, the population of Iraq consisted of 60 to 65% Shiites who are mostly Arab, 18 to 20% Sunni Kurds, and 12 to 16% Sunni Arabs.⁶⁸

Throughout history, although the Sunnis have always had most of the power, Shiites make up the majority of the population. According to Davis, "These demographic realities have made many Sunnis hostile to the new pseudo-democratic political arrangement, as they have lost the privileged status afforded to them under the prior autocratic regime."⁶⁹ For instance, they have lost their control over the ministry of defense and the interior as well as high government positions. Therefore, the shift to power based on the proportion of Shiites and Sunnis in society is one of the main challenges to democracy

Furthermore, the new democratic regime has also affected the wealth of the different sects creating another challenge. Shiites are wealthier than Sunnis on average. According to Hoffman, "Including all ethnic groups, the average Shi'a income is about 31% higher than the average Sunni"⁷⁰ and when just referring to Arabs, the average Shi'a Arab earns 16% more than

⁶⁸ Michael Hoffman, "Religion, Sectarianism, and Democracy: Evidence from Iraq," *AALIMS Annual Meeting: 2014*, 3.

⁶⁹Hoffman, 3.

⁷⁰ Hoffman, 3.

the average Sunni Arab.⁷¹ This difference is due to the democratic redistribution of wealth and the fact that Shiites control most of the oil in the country because it is in Shi'a areas. Therefore, oil is not distributed evenly between the sects because revenues are distributed more locally and the central government is dominated by Shiites. Overall, oil accounted for 78% of Iraq's GDP in 2011, according to the World Bank,⁷² so this has a significant effect on the wealth of the Sunni community.

As mentioned earlier, Sunnis were favored under Saddam. They dominated the army and government positions while also benefitting economically. Because Saddam was worried about the Shiites due to their opposition to his regime, he continued to favor the Sunnis with better access to land and electricity by investments to majority Sunni areas. In effect, when Saddam's regime fell and Iraq transitioned to democracy, the Sunnis lost their privileges and violence increased among them. Hoffman also found that Sunnis were more distrusting of the government than Shiites and that "Sunnis were over 4 times more likely to express support for an authoritarian system than were Shi'ites".⁷³ Overall, after analyzing Hoffman's research, Sunnis support democracy if it involves economic redistribution, and Shiites will support democracy as long as it does not involve redistribution. In other words, because the Shiites benefit from the economic advantages of democracy, they do not want economic redistribution.

As shown through the research above, the change in governmental ideology created new issues. Power structures were changed, and the Sunnis were clearly unhappy with their decline in power and wealth shown by their disapproval of democracy and their support for redistribution. Despite these feelings, it is important to look at the case of Iraq in an objective

⁷¹ Hoffman, 4.

⁷² Hoffman, 6.

⁷³ Hoffman, 10.

manner. Iraq has a unique history regarding the relationship between Sunnis and Shiites. Iraqi's have experienced authoritarianism and now democracy. The sectarian divides are a challenge to any government, so it is important to find the best possible way to resolve these tensions or at least allow these groups to live in peace.

Overall, the goal of this chapter is to prove why consociational democracy is the best governmental structure for Iraq. This will include a successful example in another similar, plural country, South Africa. Consociational democracy represents a method of power-sharing for segmented, plural societies. Timothy Sisk defines this method of power-sharing "as a set of principles that, when carried out through practices and institutions, provide every significant identity group or segment in a society representation and decision-making abilities on common issues and a degree of autonomy over issues of importance to the group."⁷⁴ There are many critics of the consociational aspects in Iraq who assert that they have not been successful. In the next section, I will address the concerns of those opposed to consociational democracy in Iraq and explain other aspects that must be addressed or reformed in order for consociational democracy to be successful moving forward.

Understanding Consociational Democracy

In order to explain why a reformed consociational democracy must be established in Iraq, it is essential to understand what this type of democracy entails. First, consociational democracies are used to address the uniqueness of plural societies. Within plural societies, there are differences or cleavages among groups. These cleavages often translate into political terms

⁷⁴ Marisa Traniello, "Power-Sharing: Lessons from South Africa and Rwanda," *International Public Policy Review* 3, no. 2, (2007): 30.

and divide society further. In Iraq for example, their cleavages are subjective because they are influenced by personal feelings and prejudices, and therefore, interfere with their political relationship. According to Arend Lijphart, “Segmental cleavages can be of a religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural, racial, or ethnic nature.”⁷⁵ In this case Sunnis and Shiites are segmented and have organized along religious lines for political reasons although they are seen as religious or ideological.

Overall, the current system of Iraq uses some aspects of consociationalism, but the system is not complete because it excludes necessary facets of the consociational model that are crucial in Iraq. First, I will explain the complete model of consociational democracy. After, I will show which aspects of consociationalism the government of Iraq already uses and how the system can be revised to create a better state and society in Iraq.

In general, consociational democracy has four main characteristics. They include: a grand coalition, mutual veto or concurrent majority rule, proportionality in political representation, and autonomy for each group. First, a grand coalition includes political leaders from each group. This is ideal because all groups have the chance to participate and must often make compromises. Lijphart suggests that, “...the prospect of participating in the government is a powerful stimulus to moderation and compromise, because it minimizes the risk of being deceived by the other parties or by one’s own undue optimism concerning their willingness to be accommodating.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, other forms of democracy are centered on representation in a parliament where one group has majority support. Often this majority is not significantly more than the other group and is therefore an ineffective opposition. Consociational democracy allows

⁷⁵ Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 3.

⁷⁶ Lijphart, 31.

for a more effective opposition because there are fewer viewpoints and interests to consider.⁷⁷ Within a smaller group, there is more interaction between actors, and they in turn are more willing to consent than abandon the group. Another crucial aspect in divided societies is recognizing that a majority or consensus is unrealistic and unlikely. In order to keep unity and peace between two groups who lack trust for one another, the minority group cannot be excluded from the government and must have political security and power which in this case involves a minority veto.

In addition, there are several different forms of grand coalitions. The most effective form of grand coalition should be centered around a parliamentary system of government which is the current case in Iraq. Lijphart affirms the benefit of a grand coalition coupled with a parliament because a single leader goes against the idea of having all groups represented.⁷⁸ A parliamentary system allows the executive and legislative branch to be interconnected. Therefore, the executive branch is accountable to the legislative branch. In addition, the head of state is a more symbolic leader where the head of government represents the parliament. A parliament with a grand coalition is necessary for Iraq because there is much hostility around the idea that the leader of the country represents one group, either Sunni or Shi'a. On one hand, Shiites do not want the Sunnis in power due to the history of oppression of Shiites by Sunni leaders. On the other hand, Sunnis do not want a Shi'a leader because they do not want to cede their power they have had for centuries to the Shiites. In effect, the parliamentary system with a grand coalition selected by parliament and the prime minister will allow both groups to be represented, and the head of state will be accountable to them.

⁷⁷ Lijphart, 26.

⁷⁸ Lijphart, 33.

Moreover, one essential aspect of consociational democracy involves the minority veto. Because the majority will ultimately be able to obtain a majority vote over the minority, the minority has the ability to protect their rights by vetoing their decision. This allows the minority group to be protected and feel more secure. In this way, the minority Sunnis in Iraq will be able to protect their interests knowing that the Shiites cannot take advantage of them. The minority veto may seem like it will prevent decision making, but there are numerous reasons why the veto will not be overused. For instance, Lijphart argues that overuse of the veto will eventually go against the minority's interests and simply having the veto as protection will make its use unlikely.⁷⁹ In addition, it is in the best interest of the coalition as a whole and of each group in particular if each group cooperates. According to John Calhoun, each group "sees and feels that it can best promote its own prosperity by conciliating the good will and promoting the prosperity of the others."⁸⁰ Above all, it is nonsensical to deadlock the system because the common interest is ultimately in each group's interest.

Another way to deviate from majority rule through consociational democracy is through proportionality. First, proportionality allows government subsidies and civil service appointments to be allocated in a neutral and impartial manner.⁸¹ Secondly, proportionality is also important in terms of decision-making. The grand coalition allows all groups to be represented, but proportionality also allows each group to be represented corresponding to their size. Jurg Steiner states, "All groups influence a decision in proportion to their numerical strength."⁸² This is essential for the majority Shiites in Iraq because they have never had power based on their majority status in society before 2005; their power has never been proportional to

⁷⁹ Lijphart, 37.

⁸⁰ Lijphart, 37.

⁸¹ Lijphart, 38.

⁸² Lijphart, 39.

their size. Although the minority group may use their veto power in this case, there are ways to address this issue. One method is to postpone decisions by allowing a smaller group of the top leaders from each group to gather and decide. Lijphart favors this method because: “The advantage of this arrangement is that in intimate and secret negotiations the likelihood of achieving a package deal is maximized and that of the imposition of a veto minimized.”⁸³ This argument ultimately reflects the underlying foundation of the consociational model where segments represented in small groups are better able to make efficient decisions.

Lastly, segmental autonomy is the fourth aspect of consociational democracy to address cleavages in society. Autonomy allows for each group to rule over itself to address its unique concerns.⁸⁴ Decisions on common interests must be made together, but groups have autonomy for matters that do not concern the whole. This is essential for especially the Shi’a community due their concerns regarding religion that I discussed earlier. They will receive proportional funding for their religious schools, institutions, and shrines. They will also be free to practice their religion how they see fit and promote their beliefs among their group. Other needs regarding an end to discrimination and national reconciliation can be addressed collaboratively by the coalition.

Iraqi Government System since 2005

After explaining all aspects of a successful consociational system, I will now explain what the current Iraqi system is like and how the incomplete consociational model can be improved. In general, the 2005 Constitution is weak and does not reflect the opinions of all

⁸³ Lijphart, 40.

⁸⁴ Lijphart, 41.

groups in society. Although the Constitution fulfills some aspects of the consociational system, it does not utilize the most important conditions of consociationalism that are crucial for Iraq's success. The conditions that the 2005 Constitution applies include a weak president coupled with a strong prime minister, proportional representation in the parliament, and some regional autonomy under federalism. However, the government lacks fair power in the cabinet, a minority veto, and regulation on the autonomy of regional security forces.

In 2005, Iraq passed a new constitution creating a federalist, parliamentary democracy. There is a popularly elected government dominated by the Shiites with a parliament and power distributed to provincial governors regarding budgets and security forces.⁸⁵ In addition, the number of seats in parliament reflects the number of voters and is also dominated by the Shiites. Lastly, there is a weak central government due to the distribution of regional power under a federal system. In the executive branch, the indirectly elected president is the head of state; the prime minister is the head of government and the armed forces. The prime minister is also in charge of the Council of Ministers and the Council of Representatives, or the parliament. According to Gasiorowski et al, "The constitution does not guarantee that a Shi'a will always be prime minister, a Kurd will always be president, or the speaker [of parliament] will always be a Sunni Arab."⁸⁶ Although the Constitution does not require specific ethnic groups to fill each position, this trend has continued since 2005.

In regard to the power distribution in the executive branch, the prime minister has more power over state affairs than the president which reflects one aspect of consociationalism. According to Nussaibah Younis, the Constitution defines the role of the prime minister as

⁸⁵ Gasiorowski et al., 144.

⁸⁶ Gasiorowski et al., 144.

“responsible for the ‘general policy of the state’” and as manager of the country during a state of emergency. On the other hand, the president is merely a symbol of the country.⁸⁷ Therefore, the prime minister who works with the parliament has more power over state affairs than the president. Although the prime minister is supposed to have significant power, Nouri al-Maliki who was prime minister from 2006 to 2014 took advantage of his power and excluded Sunnis. As stated in the last chapter, al-Maliki failed to appoint the ministers of the interior and defense. Therefore, he had control of two of the most important posts in the government which in the past belonged to the Sunnis.⁸⁸ In turn, he has made unilateral decisions excluding the Sunnis.

Under those circumstances, this is one condition of consociationalism that must be revised in the complete consociational model that I recommend. In order to do so, the office of the prime minister must not exceed its duties. Therefore, the minister of the interior and the minister of defense must be delegated to another person than the prime minister. Because the Shiites have controlled the office of prime minister and have been the majority in parliament since 2005, the Sunnis should have access to the positions of the minister of the interior and the minister of defense. In turn, they will once again have power over these parts of government that belonged to them throughout history. The Sunnis and Shiites will then be able to collaborate on state security issues, and the Sunnis will feel they have a more significant role in the cabinet. Another way I think the Sunnis will be more content with the government is to revise the Constitution with the consultation of the Sunnis. Because the Sunnis boycotted the January 2005 elections, they were not able to negotiate the Constitution. In effect, many Sunnis rejected the Constitution, and 50% of the voters in the Sunni dominated areas of Salah al-Din and al-Anbar

⁸⁷ Nussaibah Younis, “Set up to fail: Consociational political structures in post-war Iraq, 2003-2010,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 2011, 5.

⁸⁸ Kirmanj, 203.

voted against it.⁸⁹ Therefore, parliament must revise the Constitution with the inclusion of Sunni ideas in order to strengthen Sunni confidence in the government.

Another aspect that represents consociationalism in the current system is proportionality in parliament. Parliament seats are determined through voting on lists of candidates from each party. The proportion of votes each list receives determines the proportion of seats each list receives in the parliament. Although proportionality allows each group to be represented in parliament based on their population in society, the majority will always have more seats. Therefore, proportionality is fair to the majority in society, but there also needs to be protection for the minority. Because the current Iraqi system lacks a minority veto, the minority Sunnis may feel powerless in the Shi'a dominated government. Accordingly, the minority veto is one aspect that must be added to have a successful consociational system.

Furthermore, the last aspect of the current Iraqi government that reflects consociationalism is its federalist nature which provides regional autonomy. Regional governorates adopt their own constitutions with their own three branches of government and security forces; these regional branches and laws take precedence over federal law.⁹⁰ Once again, the decision to have a federalist system did not reflect the Sunnis opinions. Overall, regional autonomy was most important for the Kurds during this period because they have wanted an autonomous state for a long time. Since our solution only concerns Sunnis and Shiites, we must revise federalism to placate both groups. Shiites want regional autonomy in order to ensure their religious freedoms including education, institutions, and shrines. On the other hand, Sunnis are against federalism because it gives too much autonomy. In general, the

⁸⁹ Kirmanj, 199.

⁹⁰ Younis, 8.

biggest problem with regional autonomy is the control over their own security forces. Security forces are a problem because politicians have exploited their security forces to attack opponents, states Younis.⁹¹ For this reason, I assert that there should be regional autonomy in terms of religious practice and regional governments, but the security forces must ultimately be controlled by the state to prevent corruption. Although, the Sunnis would be in charge of the ministry of the interior, the Shiites would be able to check over them within the mixed cabinet.

Overall, I feel that consociational democracy will be most effective in Iraq if these changes are implemented. There is much opposition to this argument, but the consociational model addresses the needs of both Sunnis and Shiites as far as representation, security of political power, and autonomy. One worry of the opposition is that the aspect of autonomy may encourage division of the state. One opponent, Eric Nordlinger asserts, “The combination of territorially distinctive segments and federalism’s grant of partial autonomy sometimes provides additional impetus to demands for greater autonomy...secession and civil war may follow.”⁹² In this case, I would like to use the case of South Africa to refute this argument.

Comparing South Africa to Iraq

Although South Africa is different than Iraq in many aspects, its sources of conflict are quite similar. One difference is that the conflict in South Africa was between ethnic groups and not religious groups like in Iraq, but I believe religious ties can be equally as strong as ethnic ties; therefore, the case in South Africa remains a relevant model. Like Iraq, South Africa was subject to colonialism by the British and Dutch who favored certain groups and caused divisions

⁹¹ Younis, 9.

⁹² Lijphart, 44.

among groups in society. In addition, South Africa has had a history of authoritarian rulers, like Saddam Hussein in Iraq, who were oppressive and unfair. Even more important is the link between the power that minority groups had over the majority in South Africa like in Iraq. For instance, according to Marisa Traniello from the University College of London, “In South Africa the Whites, composing 14% of the population, were the original ruling class with a concentration of wealth and political power.”⁹³ According to the State Department, the population of Iraq consisted of 60 to 65% Shiites who are mostly Arab, 18 to 20% Sunni Kurds, and 12 to 16% Sunni Arabs, so the Shi’ites made up most of the population.⁹⁴ Like the Whites in South Africa, the Sunnis in Iraq had most of the power and wealth until the end of the Saddam regime in 2003. Obviously the concentration of power and wealth has a significant effect on segmented societies. Traniello argues, “When the group that owns the state controls the land, the resources and the distribution, the state becomes the prize.”⁹⁵ In turn, this creates even more conflict and distrust from the group without these benefits. Ultimately, the success of the consociational model in South Africa convinces me that no matter how divided a society is or how significant the effects of inequality were, there remains hope for peace.

Clearly, Iraq and South Africa suffered from similar situations throughout their respective histories. Despite the cleavages created in South Africa, they were able to form a successful and peaceful government based on the consociational model. In 1993, South Africa created the Interim Constitution Pact which created a consociational structure based on proportional representation and the participation of all groups in the government. For this reason, many political parties, including those of minority groups, participated in elections the following year

⁹³ Traniello, 30.

⁹⁴ Hoffman, 3.

⁹⁵ Traniello, 30.

due to their sense of security and autonomy promised by the system. Traniello asserts, “In terms of institutional design South Africa, with features such as the proportional representation systems, was able to turn the Interim Government into a positive-sum scenario where parties recognized that it was better to cooperate and be included rather than boycott the process and undermine it.”⁹⁶ Therefore, groups were able to cooperate despite their violent histories and differences to create a stable and fair government. Overall, the model of South Africa gives me confidence that Iraq can achieve the same success if elites are willing to work together in a moderate and honest manner. With this model, they can disprove theories that consociationalism will tear the country apart.

Although I feel the consociational model is the best option, there are other conditions that must be present for it to be successful. First, there needs to be a framework towards national reconciliation. This ultimately comes through increased interaction between groups and the importance of the Iraqi national identity. The government can work to promote similarities among the groups while also recognizing and accepting differences. To address the concerns of the Shiites, a campaign to end discrimination based on religious or ethnic differences should be instated. Although Sunnis and Shiites have some different beliefs, they can still promote their identities as Muslims and Arabs. I feel that by teaching new generations to be tolerant of differences through education and interaction, future generations will learn to cooperate for the common good of all Iraqis.

Secondly, elites and communities must be willing to compromise for the greater good and promote peace, not violence. Elites must act without corruption and collaborate with each other despite differences. I argue that the grand coalition should work closely with the top leaders

⁹⁶ Traniello, 41.

from each group who should dedicate themselves to overseeing the elites from their respective groups. In addition, those in the community should be able to report corruption and must address any issues through democratic processes such as by contacting their representatives or in elections. Lastly, there should be a campaign created by a special committee in the parliament to stop terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda from disturbing this peaceful transition. Anti-terror programs are essential for keeping the peace between Sunnis and Shiites.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In sum, I feel I have successfully addressed the reasons for the Sunni-Shi'a conflict and created an appropriate solution. First, it is clear that the differences between Sunnis and Shiites are important to Iraqis. They identify with their sects based on religious beliefs and mobilize in their sects to promote their political interests. Their similarities also show their devotion to their sects and why elites are able influence followers to partake in politics. Understanding these similarities and differences allows for a thorough examination of the causes of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict and to determine a solution that reflects each group's interests.

After careful analysis of Iraq's history, it is clear that the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites was due to colonialism, authoritarian regimes, and U.S. intervention. The British favored the Sunnis because they supported them; they marginalized the Shiites because they opposed them. Later on, authoritarian regimes under the Ba'ath party, especially Saddam Hussein, continued to oppress Shiites because they were the largest threat to their power. Once Saddam Hussein's regime was destroyed by the U.S., the Shiites finally gained proportional power in the government while Sunnis lost a significant amount of their influence and wealth. The new

democratic government system reflected a federal, representative democracy which Shiites favored and Sunnis opposed.

Furthermore, the semi-consociational model of government instated by the 2005 Constitution needs to be reformed in order to end the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites. A consociational model that reflects that of South Africa is most favorable. By reforming the Constitution and control over the minister of the interior and defense, providing a minority veto, and giving the state control of security forces, the Sunnis will be more comfortable with the new government structure. The Shiites will also maintain their proportional amount of power and autonomy.

Ultimately, I realize that this conflict is complicated, and there is truly no simple solution. Historical events, marginalization, and violence are not easy to forget. The lasting effects of colonialism divided Iraqis and allowed for future regimes to do the same. The corruption of the Ba'ath party and Saddam Hussein's hunger for power left Shiites poor and underrepresented. Even hopes that a democratic government would ameliorate Iraqi society failed due to the status quo stemming from colonialism and authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, my solution requires cooperation and a level of trust that may not occur right away. Despite these challenges, I remain hopeful that Sunnis and Shiites can reconcile their past and look forward to a peaceful and prosperous future.

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