

Abstract

This thesis examines the Iraqi Shia community's evolving approach towards and their position in the Iraqi state, especially after the American-led invasion in 2003. The focus is on concepts of nationalism, sectarianism, and identity within the Iraqi state and the Shia community. This thesis is subdivided into two main parts, the first of which considers the time period before 2003. Contemporary Shia identity and standing in Iraq was forged in the crucible of pre-2003 Iraq, so a thorough background in this time period is essential for understanding events after the invasion. Since the founding of the modern Iraqi state, and even during Ottoman times, Shias have traditionally been excluded from positions of power. This political division reflected the socioeconomic divide between the wealthier Sunni and poorer Shia communities. This situation resulted in sharp barriers between Sunnis and Shias. Although the Sunni-dominated monarchy was not actively trying to incorporate the Shias, economic and educational progress eventually reached some in the Shia community beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, and several of these sectarian barriers faded. Partly due to a secularizing trend, the 1950s and 1960s (the "intermezzo" republican period) witnessed the greatest amount of intermingling between these sects in Iraqi society. This era came to an end with the rise of the Ba'ath party, and relationships worsened with the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein. The divisions between Sunnis and Shias that Saddam Hussein's regime greatly contributed to seemed to be insurmountable in post-war Iraq.

The second part of my thesis deals with the post-invasion political situation. Although foreign powers and academics treated Iraq as if it had three monolithic ethno-sectarian groups (Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds), post-war developments showed this to be untrue. The Shias were especially revealed to include numerous subgroups, each with their own interests and allegiances. In addition to splintering Shia groups, the Iraqi insurgency made strange bedfellows of both Sunni and Shia militias. The anti-occupation Mahdi Army, for example, gained support from the similarly anti-American hardline Sunni clerics. This second part of the thesis also measures nationalist feeling in the democratic Iraq by means of examining election campaigns and voting. In doing so, it is immediately evident that the electoral trend from 2005 to 2010 is towards larger victories for nationalist parties. Moreover, nationalist rhetoric

dominates the entire electoral campaign – even coming from sectarian parties. Yet, deeper analysis of the election results shows that the winning parties are nationalist in their rhetoric but still quite sectarian in their composition and voter base. Nationwide opinion polls, another metric of this nationalist feeling among all Iraqis, reinforce the conclusion that although Iraqis might vote for political parties dominated by one sect, they still support the general idea of Iraqi nationalism and the desire for a unified Iraq. This thesis concludes with the realization that in spite of a clear nationalist trend among all Iraqis, which is especially remarkable among Shias considering their history of exclusion, Iraqis still cannot wholly deny their sectarian identities.