

# Fragility of Modern Arab States:

## The Case of Iraq

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### Brief Analysis

**T**he nation-state is not a familiar concept in the Middle East. It has no equivalent in the political traditions of the region. In classical Islam the state is a theocracy, a community of God governed by the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors. Such a state was not constrained by territorial borders; it extended wherever Muslims were dominant. The modern nation-state, however, is simply defined as a territorially delimited population which has consented to a common form of government. Where sovereignty lies marks the difference of the individual being a citizen or a subject. Citizenship can not be validated by adherence to a political doctrine, religious faith or membership of an ethnic community; it is determined solely by birth or choice. Iraq, like many Arab states, does not meet these criterion, giving rise to endemic instability.

A State Without Foundation: Iraq became a nation-state in 1921. It had no wish to be what it has become. It was a product of the politics of convenience and expediency. It has been a state rejected by its own people and by its rulers, both monarchist and republican. From its inception, Iraq has been plagued with religious, sectarian, tribal and ethnic conflicts. The various communities-Muslim Sunni Arabs and their Shi'i counterparts, Kurds, Turcomans, Assyrians, Christians and Jews-had their own political agendas. In one way or another, they all objected to the creation of the state, thus denying it both legitimacy and stability. The frequent resort to violent means to settle domestic political disputes became a salient feature of its politics. Successive rulers have failed to introduce an institutional framework cognizant of the political aspirations of their people. The country lacked any arrangement for the orderly transfer of authority from one government to another. In the case of Iraq the problem was compounded by the communal segmentation of its society. Failure to provide adequate machinery for conflict-resolution and appropriate institutions for political accommodation indicated a marked tendency toward a domestic political implosion. In due course power was seized by the armed forces. Each change of power has been occasioned with colossal violence and loss of life. Meanwhile the state, by the imposition of its will on society, has increased the hostility harbored against it by the various communities.

At the outset, a variety of measures were introduced to assimilate and integrate the various communities into a polity. Iraq was to have all the symbols of statehood: a constitutional monarchy, parliamentary government, a national army, a centralized system of education, common school curricula to instil the attributes of political loyalty and national allegiance into a new generation of Iraqis. A national ideology was formulated to appeal to all Iraqis, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background and social origin. Every effort was exerted to make an extremely heterogeneous and segmented population into a homogeneous and cohesive national community. However, to the overwhelming majority of Iraqis these institutions proved to be a perfunctory sham, open to abuse and liable to perversion and cruel manipulation.

Given the fragmentary nature of Iraq's population all these measures served to enhance, and eventually perpetuate the hegemony that members of the Arab Sunni community established over the political process. The preponderance of the Sunni presence was not simply by virtue of their position in the defunct Ottoman

administration, but their participation in the Sharifian movement, the Hashemite "Arab revolt." Almost to a man, the 500 or so officers of Iraqi origin who rallied to the Sharif's Arab cause in 1916 were Sunnis. They had become the backbone of the state, controlling both the government and the army. Nepotism and tribal affiliations ensured that Sunni Arabs maintained their dominance over the country's political process. The first military coup took place in 1936, followed by six more, culminating in the second British occupation of Baghdad in 1941; the same cycle started again in 1958 when the monarchy was overthrown and it is still continuing to the present.

Nationalism and the Nation-State: The designation of Arab nationalism as the official ideology was perceived as a means of national integration; creating a society free from ethnic, religious and sectarian division and prejudice. The high emphasis placed on being Arab alienated the non-Arab communities; while the close association of Sunni Islam with Arab nationalism led to the estrangement of the majority Shi'i community. Nationalism has been perceived as a means to reinforce the Sunni political hegemony over Iraq. The adherence of the other Arab states to the same ideology has contributed to regional destabilization. Arab nationalist prescriptions have granted the different Arab regimes licence not only to speak on behalf, but to control, manage and exploit cross-border loyalties. Irredentism has become the order of the day, as in the case of Syria over Lebanon and Iraq over Kuwait. Nonetheless, the articulation of political interests has been governed by the official nationalist ideology which has alienated the majority of the population because of its relentless drive toward assimilation. In Iraq alone, the quest for a homogeneous society led to the Assyrian massacre in 1933, the expulsion of the Jews after the establishment of the state on Israel in 1948; the mass exodus of Iraqi Christians, the intimidation of Turcomans; the continued quest among Kurds for autonomy; and the deepening resentment of Shi'is, who demand a proportional share of political power.

The political aspirations of the Kurds have remained more or less constant by virtue of their distinct ethnicity and the fact that they occupy a definable geographical area. Having failed to secure independent nationhood, the Kurdish challenge has forced Iraq to concede at least the principle of autonomy. What remains at issue is the degree of it. The relationship of the Shi'i Arabs with the Iraqi state has been uneasy throughout. Their 1920 rebellion was instrumental to the creation of the state. However, their pronounced antagonism to British influence and resentment of Sunni domination led to their virtual exclusion from the government. Shi'is suffer two disabilities: the first is the presumed Shi'i affinity with Iran on account of religion; the second is they have their nationalist credentials constantly questioned because of their religious faith. The state of Iraq faces an irreconcilable dilemma-the stronger the state becomes, the greater the alienation it engenders among its estranged communities. The more liberal it is, the deeper its internal divisions. To grant the Kurds full autonomy and accord the majority Shi'is a proportional share of power will alter the nature and the stance of the state. Continued resistance on the part of the Sunni minority will mean that Iraq will remain a fragile state whose authority is constantly challenged and sovereignty infringed. The choice before Iraq is clear-ither restructure or perish under the conflicting dynamics of domestic and regional politics.

Toward Political Change: Restructuring would have to take into considerations the demands of the various communities as corporate bodies articulating their own political aspirations and interests. The purpose is to introduce fundamental reform leading to the diffusion of power and the creation of institutions of governance and politics. In the first instance, representation and distribution of power would have to be done on the basis of recognizing both individual and communal rights. A bicameral parliamentary system, with one house representing individual voters and the other representing various communities, adapting the old Ottoman millet system, would provide the different religious and ethnic communities with recognition and the opportunity to play a role in government. It is important that the Sunni Arab community not feel aggrieved by the change. Ironclad guarantees must be provided to safeguard the interest of each and every community. If the system is to work it would have to be subject to periodic reviews.

For Iraq to have a future, creating a system of shared power is essential. One way to bring it about is to use UN Security Council resolution 986 ("oil-for-food") as a lever. The international community could make the renewal of the resolution and by an increase in the amount of oil Iraq is permitted to export contingent on political restructuring, just as the International Monetary Fund demands "structural adjustment" in the economic realm. This would make UNSC 986 a vehicle for addressing human rights , not just humanitarian considerations. Opponents of this idea would object that it infringes on Iraqi sovereignty, but it is not significantly different than the current situation, in which Iraq's sovereignty is violated by an intrusive UN inspection system, by "no-fly" zones in the north and south and by military incursion by two of Iraq's neighbors, Turkey and Iran.

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