Ethnicity, federalism and the idea of sectarian citizenship in Iraq: a critique

Reidar Visser

Reidar Visser is a research fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and editor of the Iraq website www.historiae.org.

Abstract

The article discusses the "ethnic paradigm" that currently prevails in analyses of Iraqi history and politics. While acknowledging the strong forces associated with ethnic and sectarian loyalties in the country, the article points to three important indicators of the surviving Iraqi nationalist sentiment that cut across these ethno-sectarian categories. It highlights the misfit between Western approaches to Iraqi politics and indigenous Iraqi political thinking on ethnicity and sectarianism, and pays special attention to the implications for the debates about federalism and the partitioning – "soft" or "hard" – of Iraq.

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Since the start of the Iraq war in 2003, analysts of Iraqi politics and society have increasingly navigated using ethno-sectarian charts. This phenomenon is not limited to the United States and commentators associated with its foreign policy establishment; some of the most ardent advocates of an "ethnic" approach to Iraqi politics are to be found in other corners of the Western world, including in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) deeply opposed to the US occupation as such. In fact, it may well be that it is only in Arabic-speaking parts of Iraq itself that some resistance is expressed to this approach to Iraqi history.

Typically, according to this paradigm, Iraqi society is made up of "three major ethnic groups". In what is described as the "south", there are Shiites, who have historically been oppressed and who suffered badly during the failed uprising in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. In the "centre" are the Sunnis, who have always

benefited from being the majority sect in Islamic empires and who in modern times have "ruled ruthlessly" in order to suppress everyone else. To the north are the Kurds, who are seen as having been "fiercely independent" since time immemorial and locked in a perpetual nationalist struggle against outside domination. Finally, Iraqi society is construed as the home of a long list of other "scattered" or "isolated" smaller "minorities", such as the Assyrians, Turkmen, Faylis and Shabak.[1]

This article challenges the view that ethnic categories are the alpha and omega of Iraqi history and politics. It shows how, historically, centripetal forces have always attracted the interests of Iraqis of all sects and ethnic groups. This can be seen above all in three factors: the endurance of Iraq as a concept of territorial identity, the persistent view of sectarianism as an ugly political force that is imposed from the outside, and the survival of the concept of "national unity" as a paramount aspiration. These factors do not preclude the presence of sectarianism in Iraq. Indeed, sectarian loyalties are a key driver behind some of the worst violence currently witnessed in the country. But the long-established ideals of national unity do play a moderating role that prevents sectarian identities from becoming all-encompassing, and they should be taken seriously in any attempt to create a peaceful and stable democracy in Iraq.

A comparison of Iraqi ideas about territoriality, sectarianism and national unity in the 1920s and after 2003 – two periods that can both be described as reasonably democratic – is a particularly effective way of demonstrating the longevity of Iraqi national identity. While many commentators resort to the cliché that Iraq was "assembled by the British" after the First World War from "three disparate" Ottoman provinces,[2] examples of the remarkable strength and vitality of Iraqi nationalism among such supposedly "marginal" groups as the Iraqi Shiites and Christians in the early 1920s show how important it is to recognize the deep pre-modern roots of the state and the body politic that formally came into being through the Iraqi monarchy in 1921. It is perhaps more unsettling that a similar "archaeological" approach should be needed for the period after 2003, but that is nevertheless the case; by imposing a sectarian master narrative on Iraqi politics, Western journalists consistently overlook aspects of Iraqi political discourse that point in directions other than sectarianism.

The relationship between concepts such as territory, sect and the idea of national unity should be taken seriously by anyone seeking to participate in the process of creating a new democratic Iraq today. In particular, a proper understanding of specifically Iraqi approaches to this nexus is required in order to appreciate how any viable political settlement in Iraq – especially with regard to the implementation of "federalism" – must be radically different from the "ethnic" solutions applied, for instance, in the former Yugoslavia since the 1990s.

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1   For a typical example see Sandra Mackey, *The Reckoning: Iraq and the Legacy of Saddam Hussein*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2002, pp. 58–84.

2   See, for instance, Bill Sharp, "Similarities between Iraq, Vietnam growing", *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 9 May 2004.

To a certain extent, the articles of the Iraqi Constitution on federalism actually reflect this historical uniqueness (especially with their emphasis on non-ethnic governorates as the building blocks of any new federal regions, and with the provision for governorates to remain within the unitary state framework if they should prefer non-federal solutions), and they would become even "more Iraqi" if some of the proposals for constitutional amendments currently on the table – like stricter criteria for the creation of federal regions – were to be adopted.[3] But many in Western policy-making circles and NGOs choose to ignore altogether the issue of cultural sensitivities related to the definition of ethnic and sectarian categories, instead insisting on operating with "sectarian citizenship" as an ideal for Iraq. The danger is that in so doing they may contribute to the imposition of an unstable political system that has no resonance in Iraqi history and does not enjoy the support of Iraqis themselves – and will, moreover, be rejected by every regional power with the possible exceptions of Iran and Kuwait.

The endurance of "Iraq" as a territorial concept

Anyone who studies documents from cities such as Mosul, Baghdad and Basra from the 1890s will immediately see the futility of the constructivist thesis that Iraq had no pre-modern roots prior to the First World War. "Iraq" is actually omnipresent in the written materials from that period – not only as the dominant category of territorial identity on a larger scale, but also sometimes as an administrative concept in which Baghdad had a supervisory role over the two other provinces of Basra and Mosul. This in turn reflected the situation in past decades and centuries, when Basra, Baghdad and Mosul were frequently amalgamated into one entity – another legacy routinely overlooked by those bent on construing Iraq as an "artificial" polity.[4]

Iraq as one entity

The enduring strength of this territorial concept can be ascertained in source materials from the First World War and immediately after – probably the most tumultuous era the region had experienced for centuries, and one in which any "deep" and suppressed concepts of competing territorial identity could be expected to resurface in spectacular fashion. But in fact, during this period of dramatic upheaval, the people of the region generally held on to the "Iraq" concept. Ottoman defectors from Baghdad and Mosul serving with British and Arab officers in Damascus soon split from their Syrian counterparts to form an

3   Reidar Visser, "Federalism from below in Iraq: some historical reflections", paper presented to an international workshop on "Iraq after the new government", Como, Italy, November 2006, available at www.historiae.org/federalism-from-below.asp.
4   Reidar Visser, "Sentralisme i Irak: en overlevning fra mandatperioden?", *Babylon* (Oslo), No. 1 (2006), available in English at www.historiae.org/maliki.asp (last visited 12 December 2007).

"Iraqi" political association.[5] Tribes from Najaf and Karbala who rose in revolt against the British in 1920 referred to the idea of an "Iraqi community".[6] Even the most subversive players at the time had to pay some lip service to the Iraq concept: a group of wealthy notables of Basra who in 1921 had tried to separate the coastal enclave of Basra from the areas further north (on a non-sectarian basis; the leaders were mostly Sunnis, Christians and Jews) reframed their demands as a confederal formula of "Iraq" and "Basra", but chose to retain the name "Iraq" for the confederation as a whole in the Arabic version of their separatist petition.[7]

Few territorial changes to the Iraqi state materialized in the critical period of transition in the 1920s – and to the extent that they transpired at all, they were mostly launched on a non-sectarian basis. Basra separatism did play a role for a while, but never changed its original cosmopolitan focus. A distinctly Shiite separatism was contemplated only once – in 1927, when it was floated – but it soon disintegrated owing to lack of support from the higher clergy. Perhaps even more significantly, this ephemeral scheme did not introduce any geographical concepts that could threaten Iraq, tending instead to limit itself to rather hazy calls for undefined forms of decentralization (*lamarkaziyya*).[8] Even Kurdish revolts in this period were seen more as localized tribal uprisings than as full-blown "ethnic" protests. For most of the early 1920s, the "northern question" of Iraqi politics – as far as indigenous protest movements were concerned – was first and foremost about the attachment of the city of Sulaymaniyya to the "rest of Iraq".[9] Nevertheless, the Kurds did stand out because they were clearly in the process of defining territorial alternatives to the Iraqi state, and the notion of "Kurdistan" is the principal exception to the otherwise dominant Iraq theme in this period.

The continuing strength of territorial identity in the early twenty-first century

These tendencies re-emerged after 2003. And, once more, examples from areas south of Baghdad are instructive. Despite all the talk about "Shiite federal regions" and "a Shiite super-state", the endurance of "Iraq" as the dominant concept of territorial identification is quite remarkable. One indication is the tentative nature of the names for new federal regions that have emerged. The most long-standing of these schemes, the project to create a small-scale region in the far south around Basra, possibly including one or two of its neighbouring governorates, has simply

5   UK National Archives, War Office records: WO 158/619, telegram from the commandant at Aqaba to the GHQ of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force dated 16 December 1918; Ghassan R. Attiyah, *Iraq 1908– 1921: A Socio-Political Study*, Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, Beirut, 1973, pp. 290–91; Eliezer Tauber, *The Formation of Modern Syria and Iraq*, Frank Cass, London, 1995, pp. 173–84.
6   Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat ijtima'iyya min ta'rikh al-'iraq al-hadith*, 1992 reprint edn, Baghdad, Vol. VI, pp. 202–3.
7   Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq*, Lit Verlag, Berlin, 2005, pp. 159–60.
8   Ibid., pp. 121–5.
9   UK National Archives, Colonial Office files: CO 730/60, press excerpts in Intelligence Report No. 15, 20 July 1924.

been referred to as the "Region of the South" – clearly an indication that it is seen as inextricably linked to a greater Iraqi whole.[10] The same goes for the more recent (and hence even more immature) plan to create a single sectarian Shiite region south of Baghdad, which was launched in the summer of 2005 and has so far struggled to find supporters outside the hard-core electorate of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI).[11] Initially it, too, was named with reference to points on the Iraqi compass: "The Region of the Centre and the South". Its ideological capriciousness seemed confirmed when in June 2007 one of its principal supporters, Ammar al-Hakim, abruptly changed the name to "The South of Baghdad Region".[12] The Fadila, which favours the idea of Basra as a uni-governorate federal entity entirely on its own or in union with its two closest neighbours, has also been careful to balance its rhetoric with positive references to Iraqi nationalism.[13] And even the tiny minority of (mostly exiled) Shiites who in cyberspace advocate Shiite separation do so with reference to the concept of "the historical Iraq" – a reference to the somewhat smaller "geographical" Iraq which in the classical Islamic period was seen as extending from Basra north to Tikrit.[14] Only in Kurdistan has there been any real consolidation of an alternative territorial concept.

No sectarian homeland

In other words, Iraqi sects do not have sectarian homelands. Today, indigenous proponents of territorial devolution see no other alternative than to define their new names in relation to the existing Iraq. Foreigners use terms that are even more artificial, like "Sunnistan" and "Shiistan", which correspond to no local terms – quite ironic, given the tendency in precisely those circles to dismiss Iraq as an "artificial" creation. The principal reason for this situation is that, historically, competition over territory in Iraq has taken place almost exclusively on a non-sectarian basis. Today, would-be Shiite separatists simply lack clear antecedents that would legitimize any project of Shiite territorial separation.[15] One of the more substantial anti-government revolts of the Ottoman era – that of the Afrasiyabs in Basra in the early seventeenth century – had a localized, cross-sectarian and

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10 On this project see Reidar Visser, "Basra crude: the great game of Iraq's "southern" oil", NUPI Paper No. 723, 2007, available at www.historiae.org/oil.asp (last visited 12 December 2007).

11 The level of popular support for ISCI is routinely overrated in the Western press. See Reidar Visser, "Beyond SCIRI and Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim: the silent forces of the United Iraqi Alliance", 20 January 2006, available at www.historiae.org/uia.asp (last visited 12 December 2007).

12 ISCI press release, 22 July 2007.

13 See for instance a press release from the office of the governor of Basra, dated 29 July 2007.

14 Reidar Visser, "Shi'i separatism in Iraq: internet reverie or real constitutional challenge?" NUPI Paper No. 686, August 2005, available at www.historiae.org/shiseparatism.asp (last visited 12 December 2007).

15 For a typical example of how pro-partition Shiites have problems in finding historical justification for their scheme, see Na'im Marawani, "Qad la yakunu taqsim al-'iraq aswa'a min wahdatihi", 2007, available at www.sotaliraq.com/articles-iraq.php?id=60016 (last visited 12 December 2007). Among other things, the article contains a number of misleading allegations about British policy in southern Iraq in the 1920s.

eminently regionalist character.[16] ''The historical Iraq'' of the Internet radicals is really too wide: it encompasses much of what outsiders like to call ''the Sunni heartland'' (again, not a proper name). The sole potential historical point of reference for a Shiite state would be the Mazyadid emirate of Hilla of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, but here too there would be obvious limits. Characteristically, the name of this polity was derived from a local tribal dynasty rather than from a permanent political entity, and its connection to Shiism was entirely nominal, with no ideological superstructure to back it up.[17] As yet, the Mazyadid era has not attracted the interest of those Shiites who wish to challenge the Iraqi nationalist mainstream in the community but who have no plausible alternative territorial framework to which to refer.

Sectarianism as an ugly, retrograde force

A second ingredient missing from the Iraqi mix is a desire to transform sectarianisms into nationalisms. This is another area where unsound *a priori* assumptions by Western academics unfamiliar with Iraqi history form the point of departure for policy recommendations basically alien to Iraqi political thought.

   Whereas many sects in the Christian tradition have readily lent themselves to state-building activities, Islamic ideology has never let go of the notion of sectarianism as a somewhat sinful activity – it is even condemned by several Koranic injunctions. True, nation building in the name of sects has taken place at certain historical junctures (most successfully with the Shiite Safavid empire in Persia, the Ibadis of Oman and the Zaydis of Yemen), but especially in the case of the Shiites this has been accompanied by considerable internal controversy and reluctance on the part of the leading clergy to have any connection whatsoever with the emerging sectarian state institutions. Until the Iranian revolution, the dominant trend among the Shiite clergy was not to become associated with any state structures at all – an attitude that survives today among many clerics outside Iran.[18]

The ideal of anti-sectarianism

Again, this ideal of anti-sectarianism is a historical legacy that was reflected in Iraqi political discourse in the 1920s and 1930s. In Basra in the south, sectarianism and dissent were frequently dismissed as evils that had been ''machinated'' by the British.[19] In the 1930s a leading Shiite historian wrote about sectarianism in deeply

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16   Visser, above note 8, pp. 105–9.
17   On this movement, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, Longman, New York, 1986, pp. 295–7.
18   An overview of traditions of state building among various Islamic sects is provided in Fuad I. Khuri, *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sect in Islam*, Saqi, London, 1990.
19   UK National Archives, Royal Air Force records: AIR 23/277, Special Service Officer Basra to Air Head Quarters, 28 October 1930.

disparaging terms, titling his chapter on the phenomenon "the sectarian movement and its dangers" (*al-haraka al-ta'ifiyya wa-khataruha*) and describing the experience of sectarian friction in 1927 as "sad" (*alima*).[20] And, in general, there appeared to be a desire, especially on the part of the younger generation, to get rid of sectarian identity altogether. Angry protest letters in Basra newspapers attacked traditionalist scholars who employed the name of their jurisprudential tradition as an honorific,[21] whereas many young people were interested in joining political parties that defined themselves through an explicitly anti-sectarian agenda (such as, for instance, Hizb al-Hurr al-La-Dini).[22] This all reflected a situation in which the dominant categories among the politically active were not "Shiites" and "Sunnis". Rather, newspaper articles from southern Iraq during the 1920s with titles like "Them and Us" referred to the far more universalistic dichotomy of "Westerners" and "Easterners".[23] Whereas sectarianism was seen as a step back, the dominant value at the time – the idea of progress – was intimately associated with imagined communities on a larger and less traditional scale.

The continuing rejection of sectarianism

Since the fall of the Baathist regime in 2003, "sectarianism" has retained its overall negative connotations in the Iraqi context. The people of Baghdad, whose city has been plagued by sectarian killings more than any other locality in Iraq, tend to steer away from blanket accusations against the other community, preferring instead to externalize the atrocities by referring to Shiite death squads as "Safavids" (Iranian Shiites), "Al Qaeda" (mostly non-Iraqi foreign fighters) or "Wahhabis" (associated with Saudi Arabia).[24] From the lowest to the highest ranks of the Shiite confessional community there is unequivocal condemnation of sectarianism as a destructive force. This can be seen in interviews with ordinary citizens and in statements by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who in early 2007 strongly protested against any attempt to deal with sectarian matters outside the "calm framework of scientific study" and, in a riposte to the increasing number of foreigners in favour of building on and elaborating sectarianism in Iraq, specifically rejected efforts that aimed to "enshrine" (*takris*) and "deepen" (*ta'miq*) sectarian differences.[25] Even some political parties whose practices are patently sectarian are at pains to deny any ideological sectarian dimension to their actions – a phenomenon seen perhaps most clearly in the case of ISCI/SCIRI, which has launched an initiative for combining nine Shiite-majority governorates

20 Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-wizarat al-iraqiyya*, Matba'at al-'Irfan, Sidon, 1933–40, Vol. II, pp. 33–5.

21 Letter to the editor, *Al-Awqat al-'Iraqiyya*, 3 October 1926.

22 Baghdad High Commission Files in the National Archives of India: 7/15/3, Abstract of Intelligence, report dated 10 August 1929.

23 *Al-Awqat al-'Iraqiyya*, 12 February 1922.

24 For an elaboration of this theme, see Fanar Haddad and Sajjad Rizvi, "Fitting Baghdad in", in Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield (eds.), *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* Hurst, London, 2007.

25 Pronouncement by Sistani's office in Najaf, dated 14 Muharram 1428/3 February 2007.

into a single federal entity, but which publicly has chosen to focus on a utilitarian justification for its scheme (''security for the Shiites'') rather than creating an elaborate ideological superstructure that would emphasize cultural differences with the Sunnis.[26] If sectarianism is really such a powerful force in Iraq, why do they not go all the way? It is true that sectarian thugs are working on the ground in cities like Baghdad to create sectarian spaces by cleansing areas of members of other sects, but their failure to receive public support from even the most sectarian parties (for instance, in the form of an open call to arms in the name of sectarianism) demonstrates some of the limits to sectarianism as an ideology in Iraq.

Partition as the worst-case scenario

A related term equally laden with negative connotations in Iraqi political discourse is ''partition'' – *taqsim*. Again, this phenomenon is evident throughout the history of modern Iraq. In Baghdad newspapers in the 1920s, Iraqi nationalists warned against demands framed in sectarian terms, because they might precipitate the start of a process that could lead to the ''partition of Iraq''.[27] During the Saddam Hussein era, even oppositionists would describe partition as the very devil, with writers close to SCIRI devoting considerable amounts of space to dispelling the idea that the Shiites of Iraq had ever sought any partition or even decentralization of the country, and with any idea of decentralization beyond autonomy for the Kurds being consistently rejected.[28] Most significantly, these attitudes survived the watershed of 2003 and the fall of the Baathist regime. In Shiite circles, the primary argument against federalism of any kind has been that such a system might constitute a prelude to partition, and even pro-federal ideologues have generally been careful to avoid sectarian definitions of federalism (often construed as more likely to cause a division of the country than ''softer'' models in which the demarcation would follow ''administrative'', i.e. non-ethnic, criteria).[29] Partition is simply not as attractive to Iraqis as it is to Westerners.[30] Even the few existing Shiite supporters of outright partition admit that among ordinary Iraqi Shiites abhorrence for the idea of sectarian division represents a major obstacle to their own ambitions.[31]

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26 See for instance the article on federalism by Hadifa al-Sa'di posted on the old SCIRI website (www.sciri.ws) on 24 July 2006.

27 CO 730/60, Intelligence Report No. 14, 10 July 1924.

28 Hamid al-Bayati, *Shi'at al-'iraq bayna al-ta'ifiyya wa-al-shubhat*, Al-Rafid, London, 1997, especially pp. 229–36.

29 Reidar Visser, ''Shi'i perspectives on a federal Iraq: territory, community and ideology in conceptions of a new polity'', in Daniel Heradstveit and Helge Hveem (eds.), *Oil in the Gulf: Obstacles to Democracy and Development*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004.

30 Some advocates of an externally imposed partition of Iraq actually admit as much: see for instance Edward P. Joseph and Michael O'Hanlon, ''The case for soft partition in Iraq'', Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 2007.

31 E-mail communication from an Iraqi journalist-in-exile supportive of the idea of a separate Shiite state, 24 August 2007.

The survival of national unity as an ideal

Iraqis consistently rebuff ethnic theoreticians on a third score: they persist in referring to Iraqi unity as an ideal, and are far more reluctant to speak about "sectarian unity".

Iraqi unity

There is nothing new in this. Shiite writers in the early 1920s wrote about "Iraqi unity" as if it were the most natural thing. In 1923, for example, Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir from Hilla complained bitterly about events that had threatened Iraq's "progress", "future" and "reawakening" – including the separatist movement in Basra, which was described as "filled with dangers threatening the country" and something that would have left Iraq as "a body without its head".[32] Is it really credible to dismiss these statements by an anti-British Shiite intellectual as the result of indoctrination by the infant British-sponsored monarchy? A similar tone is to be found in the writings of yet another 1930s Shiite intellectual, Muhammad Abd al-Husayn, who warned that Iraq should not suffer the fate of the "natural Syria" (which in his view encompassed also "Beirut" and "Palestine") by becoming subdivided into small statelets.[33] And by the same token, Basra newspapers in the early 1920s hailed the consolidation of political unity from Basra to Mosul as a desirable way forward.[34]

Nationalist ideology consonant with religious beliefs

These expressions of affection for Iraq by Shiite writers only years after the country had formally come into existence ("concocted", according to the constructivist paradigm) should be taken seriously by contemporary commentators who automatically dismiss the nationalism of Iraq's Shiites after 2003 as lacking in profundity. For instance, Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr has been at pains to stress all-Iraqi symbolism (such as the use of Iraqi flags) at the expense of sectarian rhetoric that would have had a more exclusive Shiite appeal, and yet he is frequently written off as a sectarian figure with no interest in Iraqi nationalism.[35] Similarly, Muhammad al-Yaqubi and his Fadila party have made elaborate efforts to construct an Iraqi nationalist ideology that is consonant with their religious beliefs – yet their outspoken anti-sectarian views do not appear to be taken seriously by US officials, despite claims by Washington that such anti-sectarianism is precisely what it is looking for in Iraq.[36] Even the supporters of some of the most explicitly sectarian projects in Iraq find it necessary to qualify their statements with

32 Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir, *Ta'rikh al-qadiyya al-'iraqiyya*, LAAM, London, 1990 reprint, pp. 232–3.
33 Muhammad Abd al-Husayn, *Dhikra faysal al-awwal*, Baghdad, 1933, pp. 9–18.
34 *Al-Awqat al-'Iraqiyya*, 13 March 1923.
35 The demonstrations organized by Sadr in April 2007 on the fourth anniversary of the fall of Baghdad are a good example.
36 For an example of the party's ideological stance on federalism, see Fadila press release, 3 October 2006.

concessions to Iraqi nationalism: in his August 2005 speech in defence of the idea of a Shiite-dominated federal entity south of Baghdad, SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim also referred repeatedly to the ideal of Iraqi unity and appealed to the inhabitants of places far beyond what Westerners describe as the ''Shiite heartland'', including areas such as Tall Afar (near Mosul) and Halabja (in Kurdistan) – but none of this was noted in Western press coverage of the event, which focused exclusively on the theme of ''division''.[37]

Recently, further evidence of the survival of Iraqi unity as an ideal has surfaced in relation to sports and cultural events that have mobilized the entire Iraqi population. In March and April 2007, Iraqis from all over the country and of all sectarian backgrounds united to phone in their votes in support of Shadha Hassun, an Iraqi-Moroccan contestant in the Arab ''Star Academy'' competition in Beirut. Similarly, in July 2007 Iraqis jubilantly celebrated their victory in the Asian Cup, where the Iraqi squad combined Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, and where players from localities such as Kirkuk and Sadr City came together in the name of Iraqi nationalism. And contrary to Western media reports to the effect that the Iraqi parliament is hopelessly fractured along sectarian and ethnic lines, nationalist values occasionally surface even in high politics, where opposition to the US-supported government of Nouri al-Maliki frequently features a stronger sense of cross-sectarian unity than the ''government of national unity'' itself. This has been seen, for instance, in tentative alliances between Sadrists and various Sunni groups and, more recently, in manoeuvres by former premier Ibrahim al-Jaafari.[38]

Arabism as an enduring value

As far as Shiite–Sunni relations are concerned, the ideal of Iraqi unity is supported by the enduring values of Arabism. A principal impediment to the evolution of a separate Shiite identity among the Iraqis – a ''Shiite nation'' – is the intimate association between the Shiites of Iraq and myths of Arabian descent. Again, this is not something that was fabricated by the Baathist regime. Standard works on Iraqi tribes based on information collected between the two world wars consistently report myths of descent linking Shiites as well as Sunnis to the great tribal confederations of Arabia.[39] It is commonplace for Iraqi tribal leaders to refer proudly to the mixed sectarian composition of their tribes. In fact, the focus on Arabism (and, often, anti-Persian rhetoric) in writings by Shiite Iraqis can at times be deafening.[40] All of this would have to be erased if Shiite radicals were to construct a non-Arab (or, at any rate non-Arabian) myth of descent for the Shiites that would connect them more specifically and uniquely with pre-Islamic

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37 SCIRI press release, 11 August 2005; ''Shiites Call for Own state in South'', *Washington Post*, 11 August 2005.

38 *Al-Hayat*, 7 August 2007.

39 See for instance 'Abbas al-'Azzawi, *'Asha'ir al-'iraq*, Baghdad, 4 volumes, 1937–1956.

40 For an example of the strong emphasis on the Arab heritage of the Shiite tribes of southern Iraq, see Mustafa Jamal al-Din, *Mihnat al-ahwar wa al-samt al-'arabi*, Markaz Ahl al-Bayt al-Islami, London, 1993.

civilizations such as the Babylonians or the Sumerians. As long as the ideals of Arabness survive among the Shiites, it will be difficult for them to abandon old preferences for greater national unity on a non-sectarian basis.

Similar trends can be seen among the Christians of Iraq. Today, they are divided between an indigenous element of Chaldeans and a more recently settled (First World War) group of Nestorians, whose original home lay in what is today south-eastern Turkey. Chaldean historiography has always tended to emphasize the harmonious nature of the community's relationship with its Muslim-majority environment; in terms of myths of origin, its leaders have been strong advocates of the theory that Iraq's entire population is of mixed Arab-Aramean extraction, with no genealogical distinctions based on sect.[41] Conversely, the more newly arrived (and far smaller) community of Nestorians early on adopted a "conflict theory", which they also sought to impose on the Chaldeans. Under this view, all Christians of Iraq are the descendants of the ancient Assyrians and therefore should have their own homeland, separate from the Muslims. The mechanisms by which the Nestorian "Assyrians" emerged as the sole representative of the Christians in the new Iraq after 2003 are revealed in unabashedly imperialist, vice-royal style in the memoirs of the former US administrator of Iraq, Paul Bremer:

> Iraq's small Christian community, like most sectarian splinters in the country, was fragmented. There were the Chaldeans, who appeared to outnumber the Assyrian Christians, but who were not as well organized and less active politically. In keeping with the objective of the smallest representative body possible, we had room on the Council for only one Christian. We had chosen a representative of the Assyrian Christians and anticipated this would cause unhappiness with the Chaldeans. We were right, for that night the [Chaldean] bishop's heart was not overflowing with Christian love. After grumbling about being left out, he departed in a huff.[42]

The fateful promotion of minority views

Such were the methods by which the Americans approached the chasm between territorial and non-territorial paradigms of sectarianism in the early years of the occupation – with promotion of the minority view in favour of strong links between sect and territory as the fateful result. The forms of sectarian federalism promoted by certain Iraqi leaders today are attributable to externally influenced processes like these, rather than to any linear development of domestic enthusiasm for sectarian federalism from 2003 onwards.[43]

41 John Joseph, *Muslim–Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1983, pp. 13–14.
42 Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq*, Threshold Editions, New York, 2006, p. 99.
43 In fact, for most of 2003 and until the middle of January 2004, the word "federalism" was very much in the background in Iraqi political debate generally.

Conclusion: ethnicity and sectarianism in Iraq's new political system

This article argues not that ethnicities and sectarian groups are non-existent or irrelevant in Iraq, but rather that they are significantly limited in ways that must be better understood by Westerners.

Geographical federalism as an option

Westerners frequently overlook the fact that, despite its rather extreme emasculation of the central government, the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 actually contains very few overt instances of sectarian language. References to Islam are general so as to appeal to Shiites and Sunnis alike. Federalism is presented as an option rather than a duty, and the demarcation of federal entities follows a geographical rather than a sectarian formula – the sole exception being Kurdistan, the only federal region to receive actual recognition in the constitution. No formal distribution of political posts on the basis of a sectarian formula is laid down.

Similar tendencies can be seen in the drafts for the oil law. Whereas Western journalists never tire of depicting the process of legislation in Iraq as some kind of three-way battle between Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, the facts are quite different. So far, the main dispute in the negotiations has been between the two biggest Kurdish parties and everybody else.[44] Words like "Shiite" and "Sunni" are nowhere to be found in the draft text – that would have been seen as too much of a descent into murky sectarian waters. And all this is taking place against the backdrop of the constitutional reform process, where at least some serious efforts are being made to revise the constitution in a more balanced direction. For example, there have been suggestions about putting a size limit on federal entities or laying down stricter criteria for winning a referendum for a new federal region (a two-thirds majority instead of a simple majority), either of which would have created a charter better suited to Iraq's historical legacy of anti-sectarianism and communitarian coexistence within a joint political framework.[45]

Unfortunately, many Western participants in the debate about Iraq's future choose to ignore these important aspects of Iraqi political thought. All too often they approach the Iraq situation on the assumption that the Iraqis need assistance in order to secure some kind of magical sectarian balance, perhaps by way of a "Dayton-style" compromise, or a "soft partition" along communal lines, or an "oil-sharing agreement" between what are thought of as "key communities".[46] There have been repeated suggestions that the search for "sectarian moderates" is the best way forward in Iraq, and divisive demands for territory made by such "moderates" (e.g. Kirkuk) are being entertained uncritically.

44 Telephone interview with Iraqi oil technocrat close to the negotiations, 20 June 2007.
45 Revision proposals by the Tawafuq bloc and by Tariq al-Hashimi.
46 Among the most prominent advocates of this sort of approach are Joseph Biden, Peter Galbraith and Michael O'Hanlon.

The refusal of sectarian citizenship

The problem with this sort of approach is that most Iraqis want sectarianism to go away rather than become enshrined in their political system. The long lines of history suggest that sectarian citizenship is simply not desired by Iraqis. One very explicit indication is the way in which Iraqis – even in the midst of the horrific violence that is undeniably taking place along sectarian lines – continue to refer contemptuously to the prospect of Iraqi politics becoming ''Lebanonized'' (with reference to the Lebanese system in which sectarianism is a formal part of the basic political framework).[47] Similarly, while it is considered perfectly legitimate to attack the constitution for allowing too much sectarianism (even though the Iraqi charter is not based on sectarian identities, it does not actively combat them either), very few Iraqis have been standing up to demand explicit safeguards for sectarian rights. Interviews with ordinary Iraqi internal refugees (including Shiites and Christians) almost invariably feature complaints that the peaceful coexistence of the past disappeared at some point after 2003 – an attitude that should give pause to partitionists who claim that these groups lived together merely because of the actions of a repressive regime.[48] While the violence rages in Iraq, it may sound repulsively clinical and academic to dwell on the contrast between atrocities committed in the name of nationalism and those perpetrated on the basis of sectarian ideologies, but it is absolutely crucial to appreciate this distinction and the quantum leap that exists between a diagnosis of ''sectarian conflict'' and the prescription of a territorial cure. The point is not to deny the existence of sectarian violence but to emphasize that its projection on to maps of formal administrative geography – in the shape of Sunnistans, Shiistans and even Shiite crescents – has been largely a Western operation and today threatens to exacerbate communal relations in Iraq.

The right to self-determination

All in all, the Western preoccupation with ethnicity as a basis for the new Iraq threatens to create an artificial, externally imposed system that does not resonate with the country's history and for which Iraq's people will feel no love. In fact, in many ways, the Western world's uncritical embrace of ''federalism'' as a sine qua non for the new Iraq could be seen as a serious transgression of the Iraqis' right to self-determination as such: while most Kurds seem to want rather more independence than that given under a federal system, most other Iraqis seem to want rather less.[49] As

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47 *Al-Dustur*, 28 February 2004, p. 4.
48 An example of this kind of standard answer was given in an interview on BBC World News, 30 August 2007, 19.00 GMT.
49 The argument that a majority of Iraqis voted in favour of the constitution is a hollow one. The constitution includes a special provision for a one-off revision to be completed by the Iraqi parliament with a simple majority, and to a considerable extent this arrangement was designed to mollify critics of federalism among Shiites and Sunnis alike. Often forgotten is the fact that the Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani pointed to the incomplete and imperfect nature of the constitution; see Reidar Visser, ''Sistani, the United States and politics in Iraq: from quietism to Machiavellianism?'', NUPI Paper No. 700, March 2006, available at www.historiae.org/sistani.asp (last visited 12 December 2007).

a first step towards a more balanced approach, Western governments and NGOs should rethink their view of ethnicity in the Iraqi context. In the real world, outside the leafy university campuses of New England, to approach the Iraqi conflict by focusing on ''ethnicity'' and the creation of discrete ethnic zones is the political science equivalent of attempting to combat a viral infection with antibiotics.