

History of politics in iraq and iran



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Iran – Iraq Comparative Political Essay

Modern History of Iraq

“ The country of Iraq, officially named the *Republic of Iraq* , is a country in Western Asia spanning most of the northwestern end of the Zagros mountain range, the eastern part of the Syrian Desert and the northern part of the Arabian Desert. Iraq shares borders with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the south, Jordan to the west, Syria to the northwest, Turkey to the north, and Iran to the east. With a 35-mile coastline on the Persian Gulf and two major rivers -the Tigris and the Euphrates- Iraq contains agriculturally proficient land. Iraq’s history is long and rich, dating back to ancient Mesopotamia, identified by some historians as the cradle of civilization and the birthplace of writing. Throughout its long history, Iraq has served as the capital of the Babylonian empire, and as a province of the Mongol, Ottoman empires and, finally, the British empire which effectively birthed the modern Republic of Iraq.

The British are largely credited with the creation of the modern state of Iraq, and had a vested interest in the region as soon as oil was discovered there. Indeed, as the *British Petroleum Company* (PLC) began production on the Iranian side of the gulf, the British became encouraged by indications that oil was also nearby in what was soon to be Iraq. The British, whose political and economic interests in the Persian Gulf and the Tigris-Euphrates region had progressively grown since the late 18th century, ultimately brought an end to the Ottoman presence in Iraq following the *Treaty of Lausanne* in 1923. The treaty, which followed the British army’s march on Baghdad, led to the

replacement of the Ottoman provincial government in occupied Iraq by the British. As a result, Turkey, the successor to the Ottoman Empire, effectively gave up all claims to its former Arab provinces including Iraq. Subsequently, Great Britain succeeded in merging the three provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Al-Barah into one political entity, forging a new nation out of the heterogeneous religious and ethnic entities there.

However, anti-imperialist sentiment and Iraqi nationalism grew over the next decade, which, coupled with British frustrations at home, caused Iraq to finally emerge as an independent political entity in 1932. On October 3, 1932, Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations as an independent state. (Metz, 1998) Decades later in 1976, as Saddam Hussein was officially handed power after forcing al-Bakr to step down, he became eager to take advantage of Iran's weakened military and what he saw as revolutionary chaos across the border. Specifically, Saddam's goal was to occupy Iran's adjacent oil-rich province of Khuzestan while undermining Iranian Islamic revolutionary attempts to incite the Shi'a majority of his country. (Algar, 2008) This led to the beginning of Saddam's tyrannical rule. Shortly after his Ba'athist power grab, Saddam executed several top members of his party under claims of espionage in what would be a foreshadowing of his dominant, Machiavellian personal rule of Iraq for decades to come.

Regime Transition in Iraq

Ever since seizing power in 1979, Saddam Hussein presented himself as a secular modernizer, a social revolutionary who loosely followed the Egyptian model of Gamal Nasser, the second president of Egypt. To the alarm of

Islamic fundamentalists (especially his Iranian counterparts) Hussein's government conferred women with open freedoms, offering females high-level government and industry jobs. Saddam also created a Western-style legal system, making Iraq the only country in the Persian Gulf region that was not ruled according to Sharia law, even going as far as abolishing the Sharia courts within Iraq. His secularism, masked by a nominal commitment to Sunni Islam, allowed him to engage in bellicosity towards his Muslim neighbors without the encumbrance of religious commitment. This lack of religious loyalty was displayed in the summer of 1990, when Saddam led Iraq's forces into the Muslim nation of Kuwait, a nation whose population itself is 70% Sunni (CIA, 2008).

In August 1990, Iraq seized Kuwait but was soon expelled by US-led, UN coalition forces during the Gulf War of January-February 1991. Following Kuwait's liberation, the UN Security Council (UNSC) required Iraq to destroy all weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and long-range missiles while allowing open-ended UN verification inspections. Over the next 12 years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, Saddam Hussein continually encumbered the inspection process of the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Many on both sides of the partisan divide in the US took his obfuscation to be a clear sign of guilt, believing that Saddam had rebuilt, restored and advanced Iraq's WMD arsenal over the decade since the first Gulf War. Hence, following the attacks of 9/11, which conferred the Bush Administration with the political ammunition to engage its Middle Eastern enemies, (Benedetto, 2001) the United States led a divided coalition into Iraq in March of 2003 against the wishes of the UN. The world now knows that the

intelligence which sent the United States to war with the sovereign nation of Iraq was – in the words of the official *Presidential Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction* – ‘dead wrong.’ (CNN, 2006) In one report, the intelligence warning read, ‘Intelligence indicates that the Iraqi military are able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within forty-five minutes of an order to do so.’ (The Independent, 2003) It is now known that this and other like intelligence was politicized and augmented, serving as the means to fulfill a seemingly necessary political end. 9 The end, in the case of Iraq, was a full-scale US invasion in March of 2003 that led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and was followed by mass chaos, violence and predation throughout the country. The use of force can be legal under international law if it is authorized by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Article 39 of the United Nations Charter confirms that hard power may be used when the UNSC determines ‘the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression.’

However, Security Council Resolution 1441, passed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, held that disarmament of Iraq should be done only through multilateral, international pressure via the work of United Nations inspectors, not by military force (Hartung & Donnelley, 2003). Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov echoed the feelings of the United Nations when he insisted, ‘Iraq does not need democracy brought on the wings of Tomahawks [cruise missiles].’ (Weir, 2003) President Putin himself predicted that the U. S.-led war in Iraq threatened to destabilize the entire Middle East and spill into the territory of the former Soviet Union, asserting, ‘The war

against Iraq is fraught with unpredictable consequences, including increased Muslim extremism.' (IBID.)

Unfortunately but undeniably, the prognostications of the Russian leaders turned out to be true, as the aftermath of the US invasion has appeared more Hobbesian than democratic. However, there have been politically salubrious (albeit evanescent) events in Iraq's regime transition away from personal, authoritarian rule towards democracy. On January 30th, 2005 an estimated eight million people voted in elections for a Transitional National Assembly where the Shi'a United Iraqi Alliance won a majority of assembly seats with the Kurdish parties coming in second. The transition to a stable democracy did not immediately follow the historic elections however, as 114 people were killed by a massive car bomb in southern Baghdad less than a month later (the worst single incident since the US-led invasion.) as well as numerous other suicide bombings (AP, 2008). Later that year, voters approved a new constitution which aimed to create an Islamic federal democracy while also voting for the first full-term government and parliament since the US-led invasion. After years of violence and failure by the Iraqi government to secure political, social or ethnic stability, the Parliament passed legislation allowing former officials from Saddam

Iran

Known as Persia until 1935, Iran (meaning ‘ the land of the Aryans’) is a relatively large country enjoying a strategic position in the Persian Gulf. It is larger than Alaska and slightly smaller in size than France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom combined. Most of the terrain is a plateau consisting of mountains and desert, with a continental climate marked by scarce precipitation and extreme temperature differences between summer and winter. These factors have made much of the country inhospitable to agriculture and have resulted in a rather skewed demographic distribution. As in much of Asia, the maintenance and control of irrigation infrastructure have been politically important throughout the country’s history. The most important resources are petroleum, natural gas, and mineral deposits. Iran is the second largest oil exporter within OPEC and the fourth largest oil producer in the world. Its proven oil reserves (estimated to be over 94 billion barrels, or 10 percent of the world total) are concentrated along the southern coast (Persian Gulf) and in the Caspian Sea in the north, both of which are areas of geopolitical rivalry and instability. Iran also possesses 15 percent of the world’s proven natural gas reserves, which places it second in the world after Russia. Bordering eight different countries from Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, it has ongoing territorial disputes with Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and neighbors in the Caspian basin. In 2003, Iran ranked 19 (out of 231 countries) in terms of its gross domestic product.

Iran is a lower-middle-income country that has the world’s seventeenth largest population (over 67 million people). Close to 70 percent of the country’s population live in less than 30 percent of the land, concentrated in

the north and northwest of the country and such major cities as Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Tabriz, Shiraz, Karaj, Ahvaz, and Qom. Much of the country is rural and historically had an important nomadic pastoral component that came under state pressure to take up settled agriculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The population is 89 percent Shi'ite Muslim, another 10 percent are Sunni Muslims, and the remainder (1 percent) are Christians, Baha'is, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Persian (or Farsi, as the Iranians refer to it) is the official and predominant language. There are more than a dozen different ethnic minorities in Iran, including Turkic-speaking Azeris in the north, Gilaki and Mazandarani in the north, Kurds in the northwest (part of a transnational Kurdish zone that cuts across Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria and sustains an independence movement that all these states have tried to suppress), Balochis in the southeast, and Arabs along the southwest coast. In this patchwork of identities, it is important to note that the cleavages of ethnicity, language, and religion often cut across one another rather than overlap.

Brief Political History

Iran, a country with a history spanning over three millennia, has one of the richest artistic, literary, and scholarly lineages of the Middle East. This tradition is due to the accumulated contributions of Persia's gifted craftsman, gnostic and hedonist poets, and learned men of philosophy, science, and religion. The country's rather complex political culture and sense of self-identity is heavily influenced by (a) a pre-Islamic notion of Iranian identity centered on nationalism, (b) intellectual loans acquired in the course of encounter with Western modernity, and (c) attachment to the minority

branch of Islam known as Shi'ism. Each of these currents has served as a breeding ground for the formation of different types of political sentiments ranging from anti-Arab Iranian nationalism to secular humanism and finally radical Shi'ism.

The Shi'ite/Sunni split occurred soon after the advent of Islam, over the question of who was eligible to succeed Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) as the new caliph (loosely analogous to the Catholic papacy). Shi'ites (now some 15 percent of Muslims worldwide) believe that legitimate rulership of the entire Islamic community could descend only through the heirs of the Prophet Muhammad. They regard other early leaders, whom Sunnis revere, as usurpers. A resistance centered on the legitimate line of 'imams' lasted for several generations, until the last imam mysteriously disappeared in the year 874. Since then, Shi'ites have held on to a messianic belief that the 'hidden imam' will return at the end of time and restore a just order. Shi'ite political thinkers historically have held, based on these doctrines, that in the interim all secular authority is ultimately illegitimate.

Compared to Sunni Islam, Shi'ism has thus remained more critical of monarchs and less fully reconciled with political order for its own sake. At best, the Shi'ite clergy extended a provisional legitimacy to rulers who let Islamic institutions flourish unmolested. The clergy itself came to stand in collectively for the hidden imam, in his absence. Over the centuries, they functioned as the conscience of the Shi'ite community and thus occupied a role similar to that of the Christian priesthood in premodern Europe, or the Confucian mandarins in premodern China. Certain distinct features of church-state relations bear noting, however. Compared to the Confucian

mandarins, the Shi'ite clerics were far more hostile to power holders and enjoyed more independence. Their religious functions were separate from the state and usually unaffected by it. They also enjoyed a strong institutional base. They were self-organized, in informal hierarchies that rested only on the esteem in which religious scholars held one another. They also had a secure income from the voluntary religious taxes paid by the believers as well as mosques and charitable endowments that were inviolable under Islamic law. Compared to the Christian priests, Shi'ite clerics often refused to make peace with secular authorities based on a dividing line between church and state. Islamic doctrine has held that religion and politics flow into one another, as aspects of a comprehensive Islamic society. Rulership by monarchs other than the hidden imam was always viewed, therefore, as an unnatural condition—even if inevitable for the time being. The Shi'ite clergy's withdrawal from political life before modern times reflected a desire to be untainted by the prevailing injustice, not a sense that some spheres of life lay outside the scope of religion. Hence, the church-state relationship has always been problematic.”

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