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Beyond Mere Opportunism: De-Ba'athification's Role in Iraq's Sectarian Violence

Sectarian violence in Iraq is rooted in an internecine tangle of causes, from the dysfunctional legacy of British nation-building to sociopolitical instability following the fall of Saddam Hussein to the American mishandling of the reconstruction. Rather than an eruption of primordial, unavoidable sectarian divisions, the conflict took on an explicitly sectarian bent as a result of political opportunism and manipulation, taking advantage of the fear and insecurity in Iraq following Saddam's overthrow. By applying Fearon & Laitin (FL)'s model of civil war onset to Iraq, this paper examines the extent to which conflict in Iraq adheres to and diverges from the model, focusing particularly on the role of de-Ba'athification in rekindling and sustaining conflict.

Iraq compared to the Fearon & Laitin model

The course of civil war in Iraq aligns with and diverges from the generalized model of civil war onset as presented by FL in intriguing ways. In their seminal paper, FL assert:

More ethnically or religiously diverse countries have been no more likely to experience civil violence in this period [1945-1999]...The factors that explain which countries have been at risk not their ethnic or religious characteristics but rather the conditions that favor insurgency. These include poverty, political instability, rough terrain, and large populations.¹

When it comes to variables that reflect state capacity and economic factors, some of Iraq's data-values support FL's findings. However, the data on political repression, sectarian

¹ Fearon, James and David Laitin. 2003. "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." pg. 75.

divisions, and other factors like population, GDP, and mountainous terrain do not line up cleanly with FL's model. Opportunity factors like certainly played a role in precipitating violence, but there are no clear boundaries between greed and grievance. De-Ba'athification diminished government effectiveness and made insurgency more feasible, but it was also a fundamentally sectarian process that both stemmed from and intensified grievances.

Especially when it comes to the intensification of sectarian violence following the withdrawal of American troops in 2011, purely strategic, economic factors are not enough to explain the virulence of the conflict. Discounting sectarian grievances while overemphasizing the conditions that favor insurgency reveals a warped, incomplete picture of Iraq's civil war.

Indeed, a careful comparison Iraq and the general model reveals the interweaving of political and economic expediency with emotional, sectarian motivations. For variables like government effectiveness, oil dependence, and unemployment, Iraq's values line up with the model, but they do so for a whole variety of reasons across the greed/grievance divide. But for polity II, religious polarization, GDP, and terrain, Iraq does not support FL's model. Iraq's values show that low polity scores, government corruption, and religious polarization played key roles in conflict onset. The data also complicate the simple association of economic factors with opportunity rather than grievances. FL's variables for GDP and GDP annual growth make it look like economic concerns did not impact the onset of conflict in Iraq. However, these variables coding obfuscates the economics of ethnic and regional differences – between the oil-rich Shi'a south and the poorer Sunni regions to the west, for example.

Overall, comparison of Iraq's data-values with the average for all the country-years in the study reveals that a large, corrupt, low-capacity, oil-dependent state is likely to veer into civil war. What the numbers do not communicate, however, are the crosscutting dynamics – economic pragmatism, party leaders' paranoia, Kurdish and Sunni resentment and fear, the Shiite desire for retribution, competition between Sunni insurgent groups and intra-Shiite factions (especially Da'wa, ISCI/Badr Corps, and Fahilda), government corruption – that render sectarian violence profitable while simultaneously reinforcing a culture of fear and suspicion.

The evolving role of sectarianism in Iraq

Sectarian differences between the Shi'a majority and the Sunni and Kurdish minorities have not always been politically salient in Iraqi politics. According to Allawi,²

Iraqi politics has never been, until the last 20 years, couched in such narrow sectarian terms: it was more to do with...the role of the state, modernization, issues such as Arab nationalism, socialism, communism...³

During the twentieth century, the flow of people from rural to urban areas fundamentally altered the dynamics of group affiliation.⁴ Rather than identifying with tribes based on mutual interest and political views, as most people had done previously, once large numbers of Iraqis found themselves in urban centers, dislocated from their former social ties, they moved towards familial and lineage-based tribal identities.⁵ Saddam's authoritarianism

² Ali Allawi served as Senior Adviser to the Prime Minister and was Minister of Finance in the Iraqi Transitional Government from April 2005-May 2006. He was appointed by the Iraqi Interim Governing Council to the positions of Minister of Defense (April-June 2004) and Minister of Trade (September 2003-June 2004).

³ Allawi, Ali. 2007. "The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace." Lecture.

⁴ Al-Qarawee, Harith. 2012. *Imagining the Nation: Nationalism, Sectarianism, and Socio-Political Conflict in Iraq*. pg. 291.

⁵ International Crisis Group. 2006. "The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict."

exacerbated this process of de-tribalization and re-identification. While the Ba'athist regime did not begin with expressly sectarian aims, Saddam's nepotistic focus on loyalty resulted in "a chain of political favoritism built from family level to ethnic and sectarian levels."⁶

Over the course of the Iran-Iraq War and its aftermath, the regime's repressive policies became more explicitly sectarian, targeting Shiites and Kurds. Saddam used chemical weapons – nerve agents and mustard gas – against Iraq's Kurds during the Anfal campaign, killing between 50,000-100,000 Kurdish villagers.⁷ In 1991, after an uprising in the south, he had nearly 400,000 Shiites massacred.⁸ Though the regime created grievances and alienated the Shi'a and Kurds from the state, Saddam's brutality kept a lid on resistance. After the US invasion in 2003, these grievances finally surfaced:

The civil war...is a consequence of the invasion...Iraq is this deeply artificial country kind of cobbled together after World War I...the country has been held together by this steel frame of a dictatorship...overseen by Saddam Hussein...When we broke that steel frame, it all came apart.⁹

Profound instability coupled with the Shiite rise to power to create an atmosphere of mutual mistrust and opportunistic manipulation of sectarian identities.

De-Ba'athification, 2003-2004 and after 2010

Shi'a factions, concerned about a Ba'athist resurgence, pursued aggressive de-Ba'athification programs that fueled the emergence of the Sunni insurgency. More recently, former Prime Minister al-Maliki's aggressive targeting of Sunnis who were purportedly

⁶ Al-Qarawee, Harith. 2012. *Imagining the Nation: Nationalism, Sectarianism, and Socio-Political Conflict in Iraq*. pg. 291.

⁷ "Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988: Chemical Warfare." Saddam's Iraq: Key Events. *BBC News*.

⁸ Allawi, Ali. 2007. "The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace." Lecture.

⁹ Filkins, Derek. "Exploring 'What We Left Behind' In Iraq." Interview. *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*. NPR. 29 Apr. 2014.

Ba'athists, from the lead-up to the 2010 election all the way through the summer of 2014, contributed in large part to the intensification of civil conflict in Iraq after the withdrawal of American troops.

De-Ba'athification was intended to definitively prevent Ba'athist loyalists to Saddam's regime from being able to regain power. However, instead of a process of impartial vetting, the top four levels of the Ba'ath party membership were targeted for dismissal. Ba'ath members were "not individually assessed on the basis of their competence, participation in human rights violations, or other measures of integrity."¹⁰ This system, however, was doubly flawed. By sweeping only the top four levels of party membership, some Shiite leaders feared that lower-level Ba'athists who had committed terrible violations were still at large. Sunnis, on the other hand, resented the "the basic unfairness of collective punishment."¹¹

De-Ba'athification, with its highly politicized implementation and lack of transparency, looked to Iraqi Sunnis more and more like de-Sunnification.¹² According to Terril, it devolved "into a process in which both its Iraqi supporters and opponents viewed it as an instrument of Shi'ite revenge and political domination of Sunni Arabs."¹³ In May 2003, Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Order 2 left 400,000 conscripts, state officials, and officers unemployed overnight.¹⁴ Removing specialized, skilled professionals from

¹⁰ Sissons, Miranda and Abdulrazzaq Al-Saiedi. 2013. "A Bitter Legacy: Lessons of De-Ba'athification."

¹¹ Terrill, W. Andrew. 2012. "Lessons of the Iraqi De-Ba'athification for Iraq's Future."

¹² Rasul al-Sheikh, Rasul and Emma Sky. 2003. "Iraq Since 2003: Perspectives on a Divided Society."

¹³ Sly, Liz. "Iraq Anti-Ba'ath Panel Moves to Purge Security Forces." *LA Times*. 2010.
 Rasheed, Ahmed & Suadad al-Salhy. "Iraq Rounds Up Ba'athists Ahead of US Pullout." *Reuters*. 2011.
 Adnan, David. "Premier's Actions in Iraq Raise US Concerns." *The New York Times*. 2012.

¹⁴ Sissons, Miranda and Abdulrazzaq Al-Saiedi. 2013. "A Bitter Legacy: Lessons of De-Ba'athification."

government service further undermined the already-low state capacity. Furthermore, the dissolution of state security forces left thousands of young Sunni men armed, politically alienated, and jobless: perfect conditions for an insurgency.

To make matters worse, by filling the holes in state security institutions with its own forces, the Shiite SCIRI-controlled government used the Badr Militia to turn the “Interior Ministry into its own legitimate militia.”¹⁵ Before the election in 2010 and with disastrous frequency after the withdrawal of American troops in late 2011, then-PM al-Maliki used accusations of Ba’athist affiliation as grounds to eliminate Sunni rivals.¹⁶

When the Americans were on the ground in Iraq, they acted repeatedly to restrain Maliki...from acting brutally and arbitrarily toward Iraq’s Sunni minority. Then the Americans left, removing the last restraints on Maliki’s sectarian tendencies.¹⁷

Ultimately, de-Ba’athification – both its original implementation and its later iterations under Maliki – became a major driver of conflict, solidifying ethnic tensions and making insurgency increasingly viable.

Implications for policy: a way forward?

Until the Iraqi government can provide basic security for its citizens, continued conflict along sectarian lines will be unavoidable. As long as partiality and corruption persist, militias and extra-judicial forces will continue to fill the cracks of the state apparatus. Along with heightened state capacity, real power-sharing must take shape; instead of distributing power according to sectarian quotas, Iraq needs “a genuine attempt to

¹⁵ Duss, Matthew and Peter Juul. 2009. “The Fractured Shia of Iraq.”

¹⁶ Terrill, W. Andrew. 2012. “Lessons of the Iraqi De-Ba’athification for Iraq’s Future.”

¹⁷ Filkins, Dexter. “In Extremists’ Rise, America’s Legacy.” *The New Yorker*: 2014.

overcome the differences and create a system whereby power is shared.¹⁸ As Fearon asserts, for power-sharing to succeed, all sides must come to the conclusion that a decisive victory is not feasible.¹⁹ Additionally, they must each be cohesive enough to prevent intra-sect fractures from rendering compromise too hazardous. With the hasty withdrawal of US forces in 2011, though, the prospect of any such cohesion faded. According to former American Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Cocker, American forces:

...disengaged not only militarily at the end of 2011; we disengaged politically...And given that we were hard-wired into their political system...disengagement brought them all back to zero-sum thinking...the Kurds and the Shia went in the same, opposite directions. And we were the only ones who could have been an antidote to that.²⁰

While some kind of inter-state regional peacekeeping force might be able to push Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish factions toward a power-sharing agreement, without broad Iraqi investment across sectarian lines, the probability that violence would reignite is likely.

The total elimination of sectarianism is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, working toward an environment of security and trust, in which “political progress and peaceful conflict resolution can flourish” could allow Iraq to break the cycle of authoritarian repression and sectarian violence.²¹ For a state with such entrenched structural dysfunction, such progress might still be a long way off. “Iraqi politics, from the creation of the state in

¹⁸ Allawi, Ali. 2007. “The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace.” Lecture.

¹⁹ Fearon, James. 2007. “Iraq’s Civil War.”

²⁰ Cocker, Ryan. “Our National Security...Is at Stake Now.” Interview. *FRONTLINE*. 10 July 2014.

²¹ Knapp, Peter. 2014. “Iraq’s Lessons On Political Will.” *The Middle East Quarterly*.

the aftermath of the First World War until the removal of Saddam Hussein, have been dominated by interlinked structural problems.”²²

Iraqis are coming “out of a bloody, brutal past where compromise meant concession, concession meant defeat, and defeat meant death.”²³ As of October 20th, al-Abadi’s unity government is finally complete, with the approval of the Sunni leader Khaled al-Obeidi as Minister of Defense and Mohammed al-Ghabban, a Shi’a, as Minister of the Interior.²⁴ Whether or not al-Abadi proves to be truly committed to inclusion rather than sectarianism remains to be seen, but this could herald a step towards state efficacy and accountability.

²² Dodge, Toby. 2003. *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*. pg. 169.

²³ Cocker, Ryan. “Our National Security...Is at Stake Now.” Interview. *FRONTLINE*. 10 July 2014.

²⁴ “Iraq Crisis: MPs Complete Anti-IS Government.” *BBC News*. 18 October 2014.

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Beyond Mere Opportunism more. by Elena Hodges. Sectarian violence in Iraq is rooted in an intricate tangle of causes, from the dysfunctional legacy of British nation-building to sociopolitical instability following the fall of Saddam Hussein to the American mishandling of the reconstruction. By applying Fearon & Laitin (FL)'s model of civil war onset to Iraq, this paper examines the extent to which conflict in Iraq adheres to and diverges from the model, focusing particularly on the role of de-Ba'athification in rekindling and sustaining conflict. Research Interests Are predictions about Iraq's inexorable break-up finally coming true? If it is indeed too late to keep Iraq from splintering, might partition thus be the only option left for minimizing the violence? The continuing legacy of de-ba'athification in Iraq. Evaluation of the Iraqi de-ba'athification program. Parallels and differences between Iraq and the Arab revolutionary nations. However well-intentioned, de-Ba'athification originally was as a concept, in practice it had a number of serious problems. These problems intensified and became more alarming as the de-Ba'athification process became increasingly dominated by the Iraqis and American oversight over that program gradually evaporated. These bonds of trust, cooperation, and teamwork can be used to convey a variety of messages beyond exclusively military issues. xi. De-Ba'athification (Arabic: ﺍﻟﺘﺤﺮﯨﻖ) refers to a policy undertaken in Iraq by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and subsequent Iraqi governments to remove the Ba'ath Party's influence in the new Iraqi political system. It was considered by the Coalition Provisional Authority to be Iraq's equivalent to Germany's denazification after World War II. It was first outlined in CPA Order 1 which entered into force on 16 May 2003. The order declared that all public sector employees affiliated with Sectarian Violence in Iraq, also known as the Iraqi Civil War, was a conflict between Sunni, Shi'ite militants and Iraqi and allied U.S.-led foreign troops during the Iraq War. Following the U.S.-launched 2003 invasion of Iraq, intercommunal violence between Iraqi Sunni and Shi'a factions became prevalent. In February 2006, the Sunni organization Al-Qaeda in Iraq bombed one of the holiest sites in Shi'a Islam—the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra. This set off a wave of Shi'a reprisals against Sunnis