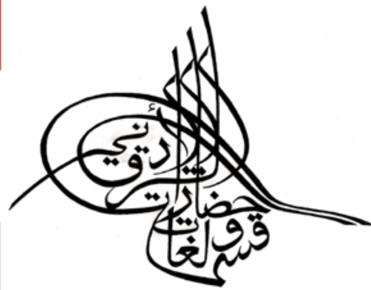
DEPARTMENT OF NEAR EASTERN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES



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IN MEMORIAM

THE EIGHTH ANNUAL
WADIE JWAIDEH
MEMORIAL LECTURE

THE MODERN HISTORY OF IRAQ: MILESTONES, PITFALLS, AGENDAS

PETER SLUGLETT

October 5, 2009

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College of Arts & Sciences
Indiana University

In Memoriam:
Celebrating the Lifelong Contributions of a Marvelous NELC Scholar at IU

Universities as educational establishments devoted to the production and dissemination of knowledge, when aiming to carry these heavy responsibilities conscientiously, contribute to the real and permanent good in this world, and as such they are the true philanthropic institutions—performing *sadaqah jariyah*. Small numbers of teachers and researchers in these learned institutions manage to leave powerful legacies of scholarship through their publications and, more importantly, a *silsilah* of accomplished pupils. Even smaller numbers succeed in leaving behind the most eternal and valued of societal capital: a personal reputation, a good name. As Shaykh Muslihuddin Sa'di of Shiraz has sagaciously said:

Sa'diyaa mardi nekunaam Namirad hargiz
Murda aanast ke naamash ba neku-yi nabarand
(Oh Sa'di, a person of good name shall never die;
Dead are those whose names are not uttered for good deeds!)

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures (NELC) at Indiana University, during its short history that now approaches a half a century, has faced and met considerable challenges, and has been blessed by the leadership and services of some remarkably dedicated scholars, teachers, mentors and leaders such as Professors Wadie Jwaideh (the founder and longtime Chairman of NELC). This scholar of Middle Eastern history, languages and literature was a pioneer of his fields at Indiana University. NELC owes much to him for his many contributions.

Not long ago we encountered a series of crises, which briefly threatened the very existence of NELC as an academic unit on our campus (1999–2000). We are however very pleased to have regained our academic strength and administrative credibility, and emerged more determined to keep NELC as an important part of IU's mission for providing and promoting international education in the United States. We are especially pleased to be able to celebrate the accomplishments of our former colleagues through the annual Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture in Arabic and Islamic Studies and Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies. Both of these Memorial Lectures were inaugurated during the academic year 2002–2003, and we are delighted to publish the lecture (No. 8) by Professor Peter Sluglett, *In Memoriam,* to honor our colleague and to share their cherished memories with you.

The Memorial Lecture in this volume was made possible with the generous support from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (COAS) of Indiana University, members of the Jwaideh family, their close relatives, students and friends around the world. We are grateful for their help.

It is with great pleasure that we can now announce that the Jwaideh Memorial Lecture Fund originated in 2003 and administered by the Indiana University Foundation to insure future funding for these important memorial lectures have surpassed our initial target and are fully endowed and its continuity assured thanks to those who have made generous contributions. We are delighted that these lectures will continue for decades to come, and thanks to you, future generations will continue to benefit from the latest social sciences and humanities research and analysis on the Middle East.

Dr. Alice Jwaideh's enthusiasm and dedication, widely supported by other members of her extended family, combined with equally important organizational support and financial contributions from our colleagues Professor Suzanne Stetkevych and Dr. Robert Olson of the University of Kentucky, were critical to the creation and success of the Jwaideh Lecture Fund during its first year. We are gratified by the generosity of many who have made donations to the Jwaideh fund and we are happy to gratefully acknowledge them in this publication. Many members of the Jwaideh family, especially Dr. Alice Jwaideh (Professor Wadie Jwaideh's widow) and Professor Albertine Jwaideh (his sister), have honored us by their presence at the lectures every year since its inauguration.

It is our hope that through the publication of these lectures, we are able to perpetuate the legacies of great teachers, true scholars, and inspiring guides. Indeed, it is the hope of immortalizing the memories of such exemplary colleagues and their good name and reputation that, with your generous help, we will be able to undertake presenting these Memorial Lectures for years to come.

Nazif M. Shahrani
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The Modern History of Iraq: Milestones, Pitfalls, Agendas

Peter Sluglett

Eighth Annual Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture
Indiana University
October 5, 2009

The Modern History of Iraq: Milestones, Pitfalls, Agendas
Peter Sluglett, History Department, University of Utah

I am delighted to have been asked to deliver the eighth Wadie Jwaideh lecture. I did tremble somewhat when contemplating the list of my seven illustrious predecessors which I consulted a couple of days ago. From what I know of Professor Jwaideh, I think he would certainly have approved of them. I hope, but I am not sure, that he would have approved of me.

I should perhaps say something about myself: I was born and educated in England, as a few of you may have guessed. I did my undergraduate degree at Cambridge in the early 1960s; half way through what was called the History Tripos, much influenced, I think, by a trip to Turkey and northern Syria in the summer of 1963, I decided to change my exclusive focus from History to Arabic, and thereby sort of qualified myself to be a Middle Eastern historian. In 1967 I went to St Antony's College Oxford to begin my doctorate, where I had the great good fortune to be supervised by Albert Hourani, a wonderfully patient, incurably gregarious and endlessly painstaking person. I share this good fortune with Dr Jwaideh's sister, Albertine, whom I first met when she was revisiting Oxford in the late 1960s when I was just beginning my apprenticeship with Albert Hourani.

After a few months trying to orient myself—you should know, for good or ill, that there was, and I think still is, no coursework at doctoral level at British Universities, which means one is somewhat thrown in at the deep end, as we say in my country—after a few months I decided to focus on Iraq under the British mandate. The subject had been studied before, but as British documents for this period had only just been released (the 30 year rule replaced the 50 year rule in the early 1960s), there was room for a detailed study of British policy both towards Iraq and within Iraq. I first published *Britain in Iraq 1914–1932* in 1976; a few years ago I rewrote large parts of it and incorporated the findings of recent scholarship, and a new edition, with a subtitle I rather like, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, was published in 2007.

In the course of my research into the Colonial Office papers (Iraq and the other mandates, Palestine and Transjordan, were administered by the Middle East Department of the Colonial Office) I wondered why there seemed to be no papers from the British High Commission in Baghdad. After quite a lot of fruitless correspondence, I discovered that when Britain and Iraq were briefly at war in the early summer of 1941, the archives of the High Commission were packed up and sent to India for safekeeping, to await eventual repatriation to London. I suppose other things assumed greater importance in postwar India, and the collection

ended up in the National Archives in Delhi: I had the good fortune to be the first person to consult it, between January and June 1970, and much of whatever originality *Britain in Iraq …* may have derives from my having first located and then been allowed access to what I discovered was quite a substantial collection of papers.

Essentially, this began my academic career as a Middle Eastern historian, writing and thinking mostly about Iraq, a country I have only visited twice, in 1970 and 1976. Of course, I was very fortunate, when I was writing up the material I had collected in London and Delhi in the early 1970s, that Albert Hourani had brought a copy of Hanna Batatu's 1960 Harvard thesis (which, essentially, forms the first book of the *Old Social Classes ...*) back from the US with him.[1] I was even more fortunate to have met Marion Omar Farouk in the Public Record Office when I returned from India in the summer of 1970, an event which completely transformed my life, both as an individual and as a historian. She was a remarkably talented and perceptive historian, who had lived in Iraq for ten years, and who spoke Arabic so well that she could tell jokes in Iraqi Arabic, and non-Iraqi Arabs thought she was an Iraqi. We eventually wrote a book on Iraq together, *Iraq since 1958: from Revolution to*

[1] Since *The Old Social Classes …* was not published until 1978.

Dictatorship; it was finished in 1989, and revised and republished twice, in 1990 and 2001. I took Marion and the boys from East Berlin to Durham, in the north east of England, a small and relatively old British university that had a tradition of Middle Eastern studies, including the teaching of Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Turkish.

We stayed in Durham until 1994, a little too long, and then we came to Salt Lake City. I had no idea what this might be like, but we both wanted a change, and after many years during which we had regarded the United States from afar as the Great Satan, found that we rather liked living here. Marion died in 1996, after we had been in America for less than two years. I can never forget her influence upon me as a historian, nor the extraordinary intensity involved in writing a book (and many articles) together. She would walk around the room while I sat at the typewriter (I should say that to everyone's amazement we were among the very first people that we knew to buy a computer, which we used entirely for word processing), and we formulated each sentence together. It took many years after her death before I felt able to write anything new, and I am conscious of her influence on everything I write.

I am not, as you will see, apart from the overall influence of a fairly elementary kind of Marxism, especially enamoured of historical

theory, although I have been very impressed with the work of Hobsbawm and Anderson on the nature of nationalism—an important phenomenon in the study of the relatively recent past. I believe that a historian should engage with *primary sources*, and he or she is professionally obliged to be as honest and truthful as possible, so, as I always tell my students, assertions should be backed up with references to fact. The primary sources under consideration can be quite varied in nature, including government-produced documents (e.g. the archives of the Başbakanlik or the Foreign Office), locally generated administrative or judicial materials (e.g. European court records, the *sijillat* of the *mahkama shar'iya*), the private papers of contemporaries, oral histories, forms of cultural and artistic production, as well as attempts on the part of earlier historians to assess the same series of events. The historian should be very aware first, that none of these sources are ideologically neutral, and second, that she or he comes to a particular topic with many assumptions, preconceived ideas and so on of which she/he may not even be aware, although sometimes his or her agenda is quite evident. I very much like this passage from the introduction to *Nations and Nationalism*, published in 1990, where Hobsbawm says:

> 'Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so. As Renan said, 'Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation'.

> Historians are professionally obliged not to get it wrong, or at least to make an effort not to do so. To be Irish and proudly attached to Ireland—even to be proudly Catholic-Irish or Ulster Protestant–Irish—is not in itself incompatible with the serious study of Irish history. To be a Fenian or an Orangeman, I would judge, is not so compatible … unless the historian leaves his or her convictions behind when entering the library or the study.'[2]

In my own case I am aware that my sympathies have always been with the left, and particularly the Iraqi left, and that I find the intolerance and historical questionableness of most nationalist writing or apologetics quite hard to stomach. I also think that originality is important, and the lack of it, or the retracing of steps along well worn paths without due acknowledgement, and of course unapologetic ideological bias, is one the main reasons for the impatient and irascible reviews I have written from time to time.

So now I want to make some comments (in the UK they would collapse with laughter if they heard 'I want to share my thoughts with

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[2] Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce que c'est une nation ?* 7-8 : 'L'oubli, et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essential de la formation d'une nation, et c'est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger'. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 12.

you') on the historiography of twentieth-century Iraq, and to suggest a number of avenues which have either been ignored, or which may be fruitful for future enquiry. One of the major problems associated with writing on Iraq is that, with the exception of a few fields (and archaeology and Ottoman history seem to have been two of them), access to the country, and perhaps more crucially, access to source materials within the country, has generally been denied to foreign scholars since the 1950s. Thus two of the three major *anthropological* studies of Iraq, Fernea's work on the El Shabana, and Shakir Salim's *Marsh Dwellers of the Euphrates Delta*, were based on fieldwork carried out in the 1950s, while the third, Edmund Leach's study of the economy and society of southern Kurdistan, is the result of its author's research in Kurdistan in the late 1930s. In contrast, Kamran Aghaie's book on *The Martyrs of Karbala'*[3], and Lisa Wedeen's first book on Syria and her second on Yemen[4] are all

[3] *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i symbols and rituals in modern Iran*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2004.
[4] *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1999; *Peripheral Visions; public, power and performance in Yemen,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

based on recent in-country fieldwork. With a few exceptions,[5] no one writing on twentieth century Iraqi history, still less on Iraqi society, in the thirty odd years before the US invasion, could have that kind of access.

Any discussion of modern Iraqi historiography is bound to begin with Hanna Batatu's *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, published in 1978, of which one reviewer wrote: 'Hanna Batatu has constructed a masterpiece of historical literature that single-handedly catapults Iraq from the least known of the major Arab countries to the Arab society of which we now have the most thorough political portrait.' The book, really three books in one, is the result of twenty years of research; it is a work of rigorous scholarship and passionate commitment. In 1978, *Iraq's Old Social Classes*, which had been long expected, created ripples somewhat similar to those that I imagine were made by Abrahamian's *Iran Between Two Revolutions* in 1982. The first part of the book, which covers the social and political history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, deals with the old social classes in late Ottoman Iraq and the origins of the modern Iraqi

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[5] Pierre Darle, *Saddam Hussein, maître des mots: du langage de la tyrannie à la tyrannie du langage*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003 and David Baran, *Vivre la tyrannie et lui survivre; l'Irak en transition,* Paris, Mille et Une Nuits, 2004 are both written 'from the inside".

state, based largely on an extremely careful review of the secondary literature and British consular and diplomatic reports. The second part of the book is concerned with the history and development of the Iraqi Communist party up to the middle 1950s, based on a mass of primary material, much of it taken, somewhat in the manner of Richard Cobb for eighteenth-century France, from police files but also on numerous interviews with people from almost all political backgrounds, both in and out of prison. Some of the descriptions of the famous demonstrations of the late 1940s are breathtaking in their authentic portrayal of the mood and spirit of the time. In addition to the quality of the analysis, the minuteness of the documentation, the extensive tables, and the precision of the narrative make the book itself an indispensable source.

The final and in many ways least satisfactory section deals with the period from the middle 1950s until the early 1970s, ranging from the background and execution of the Revolution of July 1958 to an account of the seizure of power by the Ba‘th regime in July 1968 and its consolidation over the next four or five years. The influences on Iraq of the political conjunctures in the rest of the Arab world, the idiosyncratic role of the Communists and the left in the immediately pre- and postrevolutionary periods, the nature of pan-Arabism and the way in

which the Ba'th party was able to seize and maintain the political initiative in spite of its initially very narrow political base are all carefully analyzed. Very occasionally, the book's unique depth and detail can be overwhelming, but the style is clear and uncluttered and the narrative lively.

A number of topics are important for an understanding of contemporary Iraq, including some only rarely reflected in the literature. One of the many unresolved questions concerns the extent to which market relations had or had not permeated society by the time of the Revolution of 1958.[6] It seems that the penetration of money relations during the first half of the twentieth century took place largely in the sphere of exchange and did not fundamentally transform the forms of

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[6] There is some discussion of this (and the general theme of the extent and nature of 'capitalism before European trade') in the work of Thabit Abdullah, Hala Fattah, Dina Khoury, and Sarah Shields. See also Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, 'The Transformation of Land Tenure and Rural Social Structure in Central and Southern Iraq, 1870-1958', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 15, 1983, 491-505, and 'The Social Classes and the Origins of the Iraqi Revolution' in Robert A. Fernea and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.), *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: the Old Social Classes Revisited*, London, I. B. Tauris, 1991, 118-141.

production. Thus while local and international commerce expanded, crops and commodities continued to be produced under preindustrial conditions. As a result, both in town and countryside, production was largely organized within the household or extended family unit. Hence, although many millions of Iraqis were profoundly affected by the changes in the framework of their lives by the middle years of the twentieth century, much of society was still rooted in preindustrial ways of life and practice, and in this respect Iraq remained less developed than Egypt, Syria, or Lebanon.

For this reason, while the study of Iraqi history raises many of the questions, themes, and controversies found elsewhere in the modern Arab world, it is nevertheless the case that Iraq differs more substantially from its Arab neighbours on a greater variety of levels than has sometimes been acknowledged. Throughout much of Iraqi society, the significance on a day-to-day level of an individual's regional background, family, clan, and tribal affiliation[7] has long continued, and to an important extent still

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[7] Although this needs careful definition, since the notion of 'tribe' has changed meaning over time. For a general discussion of the phenomenon, see Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (eds.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

continues, to be rather more pronounced than in the longer established, settled urban and rural societies in some of the neighbouring states, and these ties have been reinforced during the long period of chaos which Iraqi has suffered since the 1980s. Thus, while much has been made, and correctly so, of the instrumentality of British policies in creating a small class of powerful, semifeudal landlords and the virtual enslavement of the tribal population that accompanied the process, the wider socioeconomic implications this has had for the formation of modern Iraqi society have often been overlooked. Here Toby Dodge has provided a refreshing reinterpretation of British tribal policies in part of his *Inventing Iraq*,[8] to which I shall return later.

Of course, any attempt to trace processes of class formation in most of the Third World is somewhat daunting. In Iraq, the persistence of premodern value systems and social norms into relatively modern times makes it particularly difficult to determine how far one can really speak in terms of social classes. In the first place, while supposedly promoting the formation of an integrated nation state, the governments under the mandate and monarchy (1920–1958) in fact helped to reconstruct and

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[8] Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: the Failure* of *Nation-Building and a History Denied*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003.

perpetuate precapitalist and tribal relations through their tribal and land tenure policies. Most importantly, these policies served to arrest the decline and disintegration in the power of tribal leaders that was evidently taking place at the end of the Ottoman period by giving administrative and fiscal powers, and land grants, to selected shaykhs to enable them to tax and control those who subsequently became 'their' tribesmen. In contrast, as one of Robert Fernea's older informants told him in the late 1950s, 'in those [sc. Ottoman] days it was dangerous for the shaykh to have large numbers of tribesmen angry with him.' To some extent therefore, such transformations as did take place before 1958 occurred in spite of rather than because of policies pursued under the mandate and monarchy.

In the postrevolutionary period, there were two key developments. First, rural to urban migration continued to increase, both relatively and absolutely, and, as a result, while 35 percent of the population lived in the cities in 1947, the figure had risen to 65 percent by 1977. Although later statistics are hard to come by, the trend has evidently continued. Second, the various land reforms and the spread of the writ of the state to almost all parts of the country meant the gradual incorporation of the whole of rural Iraq into the state proper and the national market. Such developments, it might reasonably have been assumed, should have led to

a fairly rapid transition from the values of *Gemeinschaft* to those of *Gesellschaft*, a fundamental precondition for the development of the nation-state. A second important theme, therefore, is the extent to which this transition did not take place.

While change has evidently taken place on a number of important levels, much has happened only on the surface—modern consumerism and sophisticated communications systems, for instance—and constitutes a facade of modernity rather than a genuine transformation of precapitalist forms of production and value systems. Beneath this facade, patriarchal values, and ties of family, clan, locality, tribe, and sect continue to be reproduced, especially because the existence of a highly dictatorial and repressive regime for some four decades has operated against their disintegration. As Sami Zubaida puts it, 'The 'orientalist' picture of 'Islamic' societies as communalistic, religious and impervious to modern ideologies has actually been realized as a modern phenomenon under totalitarian [and, I would add, generally secular, PS] regimes in Iraq and elsewhere.'[9] A particularly visible expression of this was the degree to

[9] 'Community, Class and Minorities in Iraqi Politics,' in *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: the Old Social Classes Revisited*, edited by Robert Fernea and Wm. Roger Louis, London, I. B. Tauris, 1991, 197-210.

which Saddam Husayn’s regime was based almost exclusively on family, clan, and regional alliances.

The importance of taking these factors into account becomes clear when reviewing much of the recent more ‘popular’ writing on modern Iraq. Thus what was by any standard one of the most appalling dictatorships in the Third World was sometimes presented, either directly or by implication, as a kind of necessary evil that a society as ‘heterogeneous’ as Iraq somehow ‘requires’, the anvil on which the nation-state has to be hammered out. Such ‘analysis’ misunderstands the retrogressive implications of the political system itself for ‘nation formation’, whether in Iraq or anywhere else, and, in its more extreme forms, became an apologia for the regime's excesses. It was sometimes accompanied by the assertion that Iraq can only be governed by a strong man, a myth to which some Iraqis unfortunately also subscribe, or at least used to subscribe.

The notion of the heterogeneity of Iraqi society is another theme that needs further definition and refinement. The population of Iraq, now about 22 million, is divided on both ethnic and sectarian lines, but it must be emphasised that neither the communities nor the sects constitute homogeneous or monolithic single entities, and of course the notion that

‘Sunnis’ and ‘Shi‘is’ have been pitted against each other since ‘time immemorial’ is an unhelpful and largely misleading generalisation. As far as it is possible to make any general calculations (since only primary religious affiliation—specifically, ‘Christian’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Jewish’ ‘Yazidi’ ‘Sabaean’ and ‘other religions’—is recorded in Iraqi censuses, that is, not ‘Kurd’, Turcoman, Sunni or Shi‘i) some 72 percent are Arabs, about 22 percent Kurds, and the remainder Turcomans, Armenians, and others. Muslims make up 95 percent, while the remainder are Christians and members of various heterodox sects. Almost all Kurds (apart from the Yazidis), and almost all Arabs (apart from a small minority of Christian Arabs), are Muslims; to that extent, therefore, some degree of homogeneity arises from the fact that some 70 percent of the population is both Muslim and Arab.

Between two-thirds and three-quarters of the Arab population (of some 15.5 million) are Shi‘is; thus there are 10 to 11 million Shi‘i Arabs and 4.5 to 5.5 million Sunni Arabs. Apart from Baghdad, which used to contain mixed Sunni and Shi‘i quarters as well as quarters with particularly strong Shi‘i or Sunni representation, it is broadly true to say that Sunni and Shi‘i Arabs (and Kurds, although there are substantial numbers of Kurds in Baghdad) inhabit distinct parts of the country, to the

extent that what are inevitably population guesstimates are made by adding together the populations of provinces which are known to be inhabited almost entirely by Sunnis or almost entirely by Shi‘is. Historically, the Sunni Arabs constituted the majority of the population of the cities of Baghdad and Mosul, and of the small towns on the Euphrates northwest of Baghdad, and were always politically dominant under the monarchy and the republic. There are several reasons for this.

In the first place, the Ottoman Empire was a Sunni institution and tended to employ only Sunnis in the administration. Second, as Yitzhak Nakash describes,[10] large numbers of the rural Shi‘i population of the south consisted of Sunni tribes who had fled from the Wahhabis in the Arabian peninsula in the mid to late nineteenth century, and had thus were only quite recent converts to Shi‘ism. Again, when the modernized Ottoman educational system first arrived in Iraq at the end of the nineteenth century, few Shi‘is attended the new state schools, and finally, for the more literate, state service was not very highly regarded, for semireligious reasons. Consequently, when the Iraqi state was created in 1920, there were few ‘suitably’ qualified Shi‘is able or willing to take part either in the leadership of the government or in the administration. It is

[10] *The Shi‘is of Iraq,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, 15-48.

also the case, as Pierre-Jean Luizard has demonstrated in *La Formation de l'Iraq Contemporain*,[11] that in their desire to control Iraq, the British (to simplify a much more complex reality) found the Sunnis more congenial partners, and essentially nipped the Shi'i political project of an 'Islamic state' (in the broadest sense) in the bud in the early 1920s. Hence Sunni political dominance was maintained with regard to cabinet participation throughout the monarchy, and with regard to positions of power under the republic, through the 'Arifs, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Husayn.

Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that Shi'i tribal leaders were among the richest landowners and Shi'i businessmen among the richest merchants by the time of the Revolution of 1958. At the same time, the rapid increase in educational provision in the 1930s, and increasingly after 1945, had produced growing numbers of qualified Shi'is, so that by the middle 1950s, the Shi'i–Sunni divide had begun to assume rather less significance, although the Shi'is still formed the majority of the poor. In addition, the quest for national independence in the 1930s, 1940s, and

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[11] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain: le rôle politique des ulémas chiites à la fin de la domination ottomane et au moment de la construction de l'Etat irakien,* Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1991.

1950s had a generally unifying effect across the sectarian divide, a tendency that continued for some years in spite of the deep political divisions that emerged after the revolution. Finally, the secular atmosphere and the general sense of optimism in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole during the 1950s and 1960s gave rise to the hope, which seemed more reasonable then than it does now, that the significance of sectarian divisions would gradually disappear. However, with the decimation of the Iraqi Communist Party (many of whose most prominent leaders were of Shi'i origin) in the aftermath of Qasim's overthrow in 1963, and the re-emergence of 'Islam' as a political force, the Shi'i religious establishment gradually began to take over some of the Party's social and political functions. One of the very few criticisms one can level against Batatu's *Old Social Classes …* is that he seems to have missed this element completely. More recent Shi'i politics are covered, *inter alia,* in Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La Question Iraqienne* (2002), and in a more 'instant' but nevertheless highly convincing fashion, by Patrick Cockburn.[12]

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[12] Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La Question Iraqienne*, Paris, Fayard, 2002, and Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival and the Struggle for Iraq*, New York, Scribner, 2008.

Much of the recent simplification of Iraqi sectarian politics can be traced to US ‘experts,’ who had drawn up a schematic picture of the Iraqi population, in which ‘the Arab Sunnis’ supported the ‘Sunni’ regime of Saddam Husayn, while the ‘somewhat less Arab’ Shi‘is (a sort of Iranian fifth column) and the Kurds were bitterly opposed to it. After the expulsion of Iraqi troops from Kuwait in 1991, the Shi‘is and the Kurds were far below the horizon of US, Soviet and European priorities, which were directed towards the preservation and strengthening of Saddam Husayn’s regime as a bulwark against the still alarming unknown of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hence the receptivity of George H.W. Bush to those who advised him not to go to the aid of the *intifada* in southern Iraq in the spring of 1991, on the grounds that if Saddam Husayn’s regime was to fall, this would lead to the break up of Iraq into its ‘constituent parts’, a notion mercifully forgotten by Senator Biden, but which made no more sense then than it does now.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the combination of the general revival of Islamic sentiment elsewhere in the Islamic world, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran–Iraq War and the brutality of the Iraqi regime had contributed to the re-emergence and reassertion of sectarian feeling, and of (underground) Shi‘i religious parties and movements, notably *al-Da‘wa*,

membership of which was punishable by death.[13] Through the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, Saddam Husayn's government clamped down on the Shi'i religious establishment and Shi'i political organizations with relentless ferocity, not, of course, for 'religious' reasons, but because they represented the most coherent threat to the authority of his regime. Support for the Ba'th regime rested with the Takriti clans and longstanding individual associates of Saddam Husayn, and cannot simply be represented *a priori* as Sunni support for a Sunni government. It is also possible that broad sections of the Sunni population which might otherwise not have supported Saddam Husayn may have done so out of fear of the advent of a Shi'i fundamentalist regime. At the same time, many secular-minded Shi'is outside the Holy Cities of Karbala' and Najaf probably shared such fears (at least until the middle 1990s) and may well have decided to support the regime for similar reasons. One consequence was that after the dictatorship was overthrown, the Shi'i clerical hierarchy—both those associated with Iran, on the one hand, like SCIRI,

[13] Luizard, *La Question Iraqienne*, 50 ff. See also Hanna Batatu, 'Iraq's underground Shi'a movements: characteristics, causes and prospects', *Middle East Journal,* 35, 1981, 578-94, and Pierre Martin, 'Les chi'ites d'Iraq; une majorité dominée à la recherche de son destin', *Peuples Méditerranéens*, 40, 1987, 127-69.

many of whose members had taken refuge there, and the other hand, those who, however discreetly, opposed the principle of *vilayet-i faqih*—emerged as virtually the only 'stainless' institution in the country, since it had quite evidently not collaborated with the *ancien régime.* Specifically, in the spring of 2004, Ayatullah Sistani, a quietist (and it's interesting that the distinction we make between 'activist' and 'quietist' has no equivalent in Arabic or Persian usage) who had not previously ventured into politics, emerged as a crucial figure in, for instance, determining the acceptability of the US-sponsored provisional constitution.

The notion of 'nationalism,' the controversies surrounding it, and its precise meaning at different historical periods, has always been a vexed question. Much of the confusion has arisen from a certain looseness of terminology, in which the different but overlapping notions of 'patriotism,' 'Iraqi nationalism,' and 'pan-Arab nationalism' have all been assimilated into the single word 'nationalism' which posits a far greater degree of coherence and continuity within nationalist thinking than actually existed. There is very little ideological linkage between the political aims of the nationalists of the1920s and 1930s, the 1950s and 1960s, and Saddam Husayn.

In addition, this kind of analysis has tended to concentrate on the behaviour and thinking of a fairly narrow political elite and ignores the wider political culture emerging in the 1940s and 1950s among the expanding urban middle, lower middle, and working classes. Substantially influenced by the ideology of the Communist Party, this political culture was dominated by the desire to ameliorate or eradicate poverty and to realize greater social justice. As it was widely believed that genuine social reform could not be carried out until Iraq was fully independent from Britain, those who believed in these ideals considered the struggle for social justice and the struggle for national independence to be inseparable. Hence, although it is true that national independence was the goal of almost all politically conscious Iraqis, by no means all of those who espoused these sentiments were 'pan-Arab nationalists' in the sense of being in favour of merging Iraq into a larger Arab entity.

In general, until the Suez crisis and the tripartite invasion of Egypt in 1956, the appeal of pan-Arab nationalism in Iraq was largely confined to sections of the Sunni Arab urban middle and lower middle classes, for two main reasons. In the first place, pan-Arab nationalism has always been a predominantly urban phenomenon, and in the 1940s and 1950s, the Sunnis formed the majority of the urban population. Second, the Arab

world outside Iraq is overwhelmingly Sunni, while over one-quarter of all Iraqis are Kurds and more than half are Shi‘is. Although, as we have already noted, the two communities are not monolithic, neither has seen its interests being best served by Iraq joining a wider Arab federation. No major Nasserist political organization was ever set up in Iraq, and even though an Iraqi branch of the pan-Arab Ba‘th party was founded in 1951, its appeal was limited, and party membership long remained extremely small. Thus the Ba‘th projected pan-Arab nationalism retrospectively onto Iraq after 1968, and Iraqi history was rewritten to extend the historic role both of pan-Arab nationalism and of the Ba‘th itself. I will return to this in greater detail when I discuss Eric Davis' book.

A highly original analysis of the daily reality of pan-Arab nationalism and of contemporary Iraqi history is provided in *Republic of Fear: Saddam's Iraq* (1989, 1998) by Samir al-Khalil, the pseudonym of Kanan Makiya, a well-known writer and political activist, who had great difficulty in getting his original manuscript accepted for publication. It is a brilliantly savage denunciation and analysis of Arab populist politics that shows how Ba‘thist pan-Arabism developed into an all-embracing instrument of state terror, how Saddam Husayn and his circle perfected it for this purpose, and how far this process succeeded in debasing public

discourse and political life both in Iraq and in much of the rest of the Arab world.

In 1978, membership in any political party beside the Baʻth became a capital offence for members or ex-members of the armed forces (there was universal conscription at the time). Any political discourse that did not endorse or applaud Baʻth rule became first impossible and then dangerous. All this was accompanied by a degree of government-directed repression and lawlessness almost unparalleled in the Arab world at the time, and the development of a vast personality cult around Saddam Husayn. In time, as al-Khalil shows, the Iraqi population became so mesmerized by the constant barrage of propaganda directed toward it that people either stopped thinking anything controversial, or took refuge in small circles of family and trusted friends.[14] al-Khalil does not directly address himself either to the wider Middle Eastern situation or Iraq's role within it, one of the few criticisms that can be made of the book. Nevertheless, it is refreshing to find an author, writing well before it was fashionable or advisable to demonize Saddam Husayn, with the courage and honesty to give an accurate description of this disgusting regime.

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[14] For a description of a similar phenomenon in Syria, see Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Republic of Fear is a pessimistic and deeply troubling book, but it has the merits of candour and realism.

In 2001, I decided to make a third, and what will be the final, revision of *Iraq since 1958 from Revolution to Dictatorship.* The bibliography of the first edition (1989) was eight pages, the third edition, eighteen. I just caught the first edition of Charles Tripp's *History of Iraq* (Cambridge, 2000, now in its third [2007] revised edition), which I think is the best 'straight narrative history' available. Tripp has achieved the almost impossible: a concise, well thought out, and exceptionally clearly written account of Iraqi history. He combines perceptive analysis with a clear chronological approach, and although the poor man is cast adrift in a department of Political Science, he eschews the wilder flights of poli-sci speak, which often serve to obscure rather than enhance our understanding of historical and sociopolitical processes.

In the introduction, Tripp sets out three major themes, which inform the chronological structure of the rest of the book: the resilience of patrimonialism and patron–client relations; the shifting basis of the political economy caused by the growing importance of oil revenues since the early 1930s, and the particularly frequent, almost relentless, resort to violence to suppress dissent. He also introduces the concept of different

'narratives,' which he defines as 'the accounts people give of themselves and others in relation to the state, as well as their efforts to make the history of the state conform to their self-image' (1).

Another book that adds considerably to our knowledge and understanding of the modern history of Iraq is Toby Dodge's *Inventing Iraq*, an analysis of the principal assumptions behind British rule in the 1920s and early 1930s. Dodge shows how British colonial administrators understood their tasks in Iraq during the occupation and mandate (1914–1932), and the ways in which these perceptions shaped policy and practice, and ultimately, the form of the fledgling Iraqi polity. These understandings were not unitary or homogeneous, but depended very much on the individual administrator's grasp of the composition and constitution of Iraqi society. In an original and persuasive manner, Dodge argues against 'transhistorical' or essentialist views of late colonialism. He shows the multifaceted nature of colonial practice, and the often widely divergent views put forward by different colonial officials, both in London and in Iraq. In addition, he also shows, contrary to much received opinion, that the British, both in London and Baghdad, were genuinely constrained by the nature of the mandate—that is, they were only too well aware that Iraq was not a colony and could not be treated as such.

The empirical base of the book is British archival material from London and New Delhi, used with great skill. It is also theoretically ambitious, bringing in many of the themes of 'Orientalism', and traces the models of 'Oriental despotism' implicit in British officials' understanding of the Ottoman Empire. It is especially interesting to see how the mandate administration's often contemptuous dismissal of the previous four hundred years of Ottoman rule[15] shaped its practice and planning (43–61). Little attention was paid to the fact that the Ottoman empire had been through a period of substantial reform and change throughout the 19th century; the British administration was viewed by its own officials as 'rescuing' the Iraqi provinces from the misery and squalor in which the British-Indian Occupation force had found them.

The book is about state building, and here, as Dodge notes in his introduction and conclusion, the record has not been such as to inspire confidence. In mandatory Iraq, the nature of British rule meant that social forces were never greatly engaged with the state and, immediately after independence, no political organisation either bothered to obtain, or was able to obtain, any broadly based national constituency. This gradually led

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[15] Echoing, in many ways, the negative (and entirely a-historical) views about the Ottoman period held quite tenaciously by many Iraqis of my age.

to the extreme vulnerability of the state when its colonial protectors had departed, or, to use a more neutral if more elusive term, its *relative autonomy*, that is, the sense in which the state was not firmly rooted in society and was thus ‘up for grabs’ to the highest or, more relevantly, the most militarily effective, bidder. Hence, it was relatively easy for the state to be captured by well-organised or even fortuitously positioned, armed groups, generally from lower middle class rural or urban backgrounds. Four years after the end of the mandate, Iraq had the dubious distinction of hosting the first military coup in the Middle East; a succession of military backed governments were in power between 1936 and 1941, a period which was put to an end by a second British occupation between 1941 and 1945.

Let me now turn to Eric Davis’ *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (2005). I know now, but I did not know when I began to write this talk, that Eric was addressing you all, perhaps in this very room, in 2008. I regard it as one of the more thought-provoking, intriguing and I have to say sometimes exasperating books on modern Middle Eastern history; it is immensely erudite, conceptually rigorous and shows a profound and nuanced familiarity with a very wide range of material. It also sets out an extremely useful and sensitive periodisation of the various tergiversations of Ba‘thist rule

between 1968 and 2003, which should become part of any ‘standard account’ of Iraqi history. Also of great interest to me, as someone particularly fascinated by the mechanisms, which keep authoritarian regimes in power,[16] is the book’s investigation of how states achieve consent by means other than by coercion, and in this case how the presentation of the process of nation building is used to elicit, or is thought to be able to help to elicit, the consent of the governed.

The main thrust of the book is its analysis of the many ways in which the Iraqi regime co-opted intellectuals to create a historical master narrative, or myth, of the origins and continuity of the Iraqi state, although it says too little about what happens when such myths are so patently unbelievable; understandably, perhaps, it is difficult to find out about the reception of this kind of ‘intellectual production’.[17] The book’s central tenet is that there are two competing models of Iraqi history, the pan-

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[16] See ‘The Ozymandias Syndrome: questioning the Stability of Middle Eastern Regimes’, in Oliver Schlumberger (ed.), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism; Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2007, 93-108, 281-283.

[17] Purely anecdotally, I remember the disdain expressed by East German intellectuals for what might be called overstatements of the party line in the 1970s and 1980s.

Arabist and the Iraqi nationalist; since the pan-Arabists were in power for the whole period between 1968 and 2003, they attempted, at least until the devastations of the 1990s, to impose their version of the past as the 'official' narrative. An official *Project for the Rewriting of History*, begun in 1968, was in full swing after 1979; "More than simple indoctrination, the project represented an attempt to create a new public sphere, including the reconstitution of political identity, the relationship of the citizen to the state, and public understandings of national heritage" (148).

Put simply, what the Ba'th sought to do was to impose a very narrow sectarian (i.e. Sunni) vision of the 'Iraqi past' on the Iraqi population, essentially downplaying, negating, or ignoring the history (and contribution) of the Kurds and the Shi'is, and vilifying the history of other nations (for example, Israel or Syria). They wanted, as Davis says, to 'purify' the historical record by tying the master narrative to the glorious Sunni Arab past, with a degree of paranoia and xenophobia towards those Iraqis who did not or could not participate in this heritage, *turath*, because of the circumstances of their birth or descent. At whatever level, a doctrine that devalued the contribution of four-fifths of the population to the national past had little chance of being accepted by that large majority whose past was being so disparaged, and its constant reiteration was a

major factor leading to resentment, rejection, and sectarian division from which universal education and growing secularism had largely spared Iraq until the late 1970s. Somewhat perversely, since the Iraqi nationalists were only ever in a position to publicise their views for a short time, and were generally not in the business of intellectual coercion, Davis chides them for failing to provide a counter-hegemonic vision of Iraqi society.[18] Also, while it may have been 'critical that the regime address the issue of trust among Iraqi ethnic groups and the desire of the people not to be cut off from the past' (p. 54), the regime's answer to this, namely imposing a vision of the past where Shi'is and Kurds had no real role, would scarcely have addressed either issue satisfactorily. Davis acknowledges this quite explicitly:

> Through association of control of the state with by a small Sunni Arab elite, Pan-Arabism became for many Iraqis a metaphor of the

[18] E.g. ' … leftist nationalists often have not been sensitive to the social and cultural unity that Pan-Arabists feel would be achieved would be achieved through the creation of a supra-national Arab state.' (14). But this does not explain how '… Ba'thism was ultimately able to dominate political and cultural space in Iraq after 1968' (*loc. cit.)*. This could only happen because the Ba'thists controlled crucial parts of the armed forces, and removed /and or liquidated competing ideologies, not because they somehow 'won the debate.' See also 52-53.

political, economic and cultural exclusion of the bulk of the populace from public life (55).

Also, going back to an ancient hobbyhorse of mine, the received wisdom (which Davis seems to share, see pages (82–83) that Pan-Arabism enjoyed widespread support among Iraqis between the 1930s and 1950s should not go completely unchallenged. According to Batatu, the nationalist *Hizb al-Istiqlal* had degenerated into a rather passé political salon by the mid-1950s; the Ba‘th Party had only a handful of (then mostly Shi‘i) followers before the 1958 Revolution, and I have already mentioned, no Nasserist political party existed, or indeed would ever come into existence. Again, although this may be beside the point, in that the historic moment may have passed, no serious moves in the direction of pan-Arabism were made after the overthrow of Qasim by any of the governments that succeeded him, including those containing his most avowedly pan-Arab opponents.

Self-evidently, the conflicts and paradoxes (which is what I gather ‘antinomies’ means) of the years between 1945 and 1958 are especially crucial in any consideration of what followed. Although the period was certainly characterised by political repression, civil society began to flourish; political parties expanded, newspapers proliferated, and there

were relatively free elections in 1954 (95).[19] I will return to this theme later, but one of the many interesting *leitmotifs* of this book is that this 'liberal period', like the 1920 Revolution and the period between 1958 and, say, 1961, serves for Davis as evidence that there have been occasions at more or less crucial moments when Iraqis have overcome their 'primordial' (my term, not his) differences, or found nonviolent ways of communicating with one another. In some sense he sees these moments as—and I have thought about this a great deal and I'm still not quite sure that I have characterised them properly—as pointing to the existence of some sort of 'bank of social merit' on whose deposits subsequent generations will always be able to draw.

The period after the overthrow of the monarchy was also crucial; Qasim's unwillingness to enter the United Arab Republic was regarded as a massive failure (deviance, *inhiraf*) by the pan-Arabists, while the Communists regarded this as an irrelevant distraction from the task of state-building and attending to more pressing social concerns (such as land reform, the eradication of urban poverty and so on). Like me, Davis thinks that the Qasim period, with all its muddle, inconsistency and confusion was one of the few bright spots in modern Iraqi history,

[19] The last of their kind until 2005.

although this is not an area where the bar can be set very high. In a way, the overthrow of Qasim in 1963 echoed the overthrow of Musaddiq a decade or so earlier; both were potentially too left leaning for the United States to stomach. As mentioned earlier, the *Project for the Rewriting of History* was originally launched when the Ba'th came to power in 1968. The idea was to integrate pan-Arabism with an Iraq-centred nationalism, based on the glorious Arab past but also reaching back to the Mesopotamian heritage. Another pillar of this nonsensical project was that Iraq's ancientness somehow entitled it to assume the leadership of the Arab world. Apart from paid sycophants in other Arab countries, no one gave any serious attention to these claims.

Nevertheless, by the mid-1970s the rewriting had developed into a sizeable cottage industry, aided with the huge rise in Iraqi oil revenues (from about $1bn in 1972 to $33bn in 1980). Foreigners like Pierre Rossi, the former French cultural attaché in Baghdad, and the American Christine Moss Helms, were encouraged to write in praise of the regime, its courageous defiance of its enemies and so on. By the mid-1980s, Davis says, the state had lost much of the credibility it had gained in the 1970s—although I am not sure that it ever did have very much credibility. After all, the fact that Iraq was better off and could spend more on social and

other services had nothing to do with Ba‘thist genius or munificence. The substantial rise in oil prices was quite fortuitous (or at least it owed nothing to the policies of the regime), as was very obvious when the price fell precipitately after 1984, reached its nadir in 1999, and began to move upwards again in the early 2000s. Also after 1984, the regime began to repair its fences with the West, and largely stopped its aggressive war of words against Israel.

The Iran/Iraq war of the 1980s was a heaven-sent opportunity for the rewriters of Iraqi history, who could rattle on about the age old rivalries between Sunnis and Shi‘is (who were really a kind of Persian fifth column), the perfidious Iranians, a revived *shu‘ubiya* and so on, for which there was no historical justification (and remember, so-called historians were drafted into the project). Hatred of Iran was stepped up when Iraq began to lose, but as we all know, the Iranian revolution was not especially attractive to nonreligious Shi‘is, and the war was actually fought between Iraqi Shi‘i conscripts on one side and Iran Shi‘i conscripts on the other. Here and elsewhere I get slightly irritated with Davis for *not* saying (e.g. in the middle of Chapter 7), what a lot of poisonous nonsense this all was, the cult of Saddam Husayn, the vicious anti-Shi‘ism, and so on. Again, it’s difficult to be entirely convinced by his ‘silver liningism’;

he sees the war, with all its lunacy and misery, as having ‘important implications for the creation of a civil society’. It was a time when Iraqis of all sects and ethnicities worked together, were committed to the defence of the nation state, and when ‘the prevailing assumption of the 1970s that prosperity and the social welfare state were givens of the Iraqi political system [was eliminated]’, and that Iraqis began to realize that that the regime ‘could also cause tremendous human and material suffering’ and began to ‘contemplate alternatives to Ba‘thist authoritarianism’ (198–99). I think most Iraqis had contemplated those alternatives long before that; I do not know how ‘progressive’ their suggestions or conclusions were, since all functioning opposition had been destroyed or driven far underground.

Davis’ eighth chapter (‘Memories of State and the Arts of Resistance’) is one of the most interesting in the book; here he tries to show how ‘official’ history was written and formulated, as well as showing (not very convincingly) the existence of weapons-of-the-weak-type resistance against the official line, and the work of the odd author whose book does not make the customary obeisance to the Ba‘th). A major feature of ‘history writing’ seems to have the privileging of Arabism (and ultimately tribalism, meaning ultimately Saddam Husayn’s

own Albu Nasir) over Islam, at least until Saddam Husayn's rediscovery of Islam in the last years of his rule. It also involved a distorted interpretation of the works of respected poets and others to suggest (quite erroneously) that at least some of their work was motivated by pan-Arabist sentiment. Davis certainly provides an extremely sophisticated analysis, but one would like to know how far the subversion being practised by intellectuals through textbooks and other writings was actually perceived by their readers.

In the final chapter Davis takes us though the dismal 1990s and early 2000s. Here again, he tries to work his usual magic of making gold out of base metal, in this case criticising the 'negative and pessimistic tone' of 'post–Gulf War interpretations of Iraqi politics'. I have often wondered, in a rather simplistic way, whether the US might have saved itself a great deal of trouble by pushing on to Baghdad and overthrowing the regime in 1991, and I have never really bought into the idea that this would have been too deeply shocking for the surrounding states to bear. I imagine the truth is that both Sa'udi Arabia and Turkey painted lurid pictures to the Americans of the kind of Shi'i juggernaut that would emerge after the tyrant's overthrow—of course, that did happen in 2003, but it is hard to imagine that it could have happened in 1991. Davis is

particularly incensed at Makiya's *Republic of Fear* for, as it were, playing into the hands of the Ba'th's desire to present itself as invincible, that the regime would only crumble with Saddam death, etc etc. Davis sees it differently (the bank of social merit again) claiming that the intifada showed that the spirit of resistance was not dead:

> To counter those who point to the widespread security and military apparatus the regime developed under the 'republic of fear,' I would ask whether a gang holding hostages is exhibiting strength or power in any meaningful sense for any duration of time (282).

To which one can only say, yes, but 35 years (1968–2003) is an awfully long time. While I agree with both Davis and Nazih Ayubi in characterising Iraq and similar regimes as weak rather than strong states,[20] such judgements miss both an important aspect of Makiya's argument, and its inherent timeliness. *Republic of Fear* was first published in 1989; it's instructive to review what was then available to the intelligent general reader, two years after the bombing of Halabja (which was still being discussed as if it was not quite clear what had happened there). In fact, before or at more or less the same time as *Republic of Fear*, the intelligent

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[20] See Nazih Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab state: Politics and Society in the Middle East,* London, I.B. Tauris, 1995, and Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1988.

reader in the West had little to consult except the work of such pro-Iraqi luminaries as Pierre Rossi and Christine Moss Helms, Batatu's vital but not easily accessible *Old Social Classes …,* the truly execrable *Socialist Iraq* by Majid Khadduri, the first edition of Phebe Marr's general history,[21] and, I suppose, our own *Iraq since 1958.*

Furthermore, in the late 1980s many writers, especially in Western Europe, North America, and almost less excusably, in the Arab world, seem to have been unable to characterise the regime as it actually was, a kleptocracy and a cat's paw of the United States. In those days there was often the sense, in both Arab and Western business circles, that however wicked and ruthless Saddam Husayn might be, he 'got things done,' somewhat in the spirit of an earlier dictator who 'at least' made the trains run on time. In these circumstances the publication of *Republic of Fear* was both an act of courage and an important landmark in enabling the rest of the world to see, for the first time in such detail, what an inescapably dreadful regime this was.

[21] The emphasis of Marr's second edition (which came out in 2003) showed a greater appreciation of the awfulness of the regime than the first edition, which, not to put too fine a point on it, came out at a time when Marr still occupied a fairly high position in the foreign policy-making apparatus of the government of the United States.

I would like to return briefly to Davis' belief, which I understand will be elaborated further in his next book, and to which I would dearly love to subscribe, that 'in spite of everything' some elements of resistance and/or civil society have not been extinguished and form reservoirs of decency and islands of hope within the consciousness of the population—perhaps an echo of Partha Chatterjee's notions of the colonisable exterior and the impenetrable interior—which he sees as always having existed, and still existing, in the broadest sense among the Iraqi population, however long and however profoundly it has been repressed.

As must by now be obvious, I find it difficult to share this conviction. I am, I suppose, as I read yesterday about Richard Holbrooke, 'always ready to tell you why the latest plan won't work.'[22] Davis' notion won't work because I think it underestimates the extent of the undermining of civility and civil society that took place in the 1990s and early 2000s. Something especially dreadful seems to happen when the ethnic or sectarian genie is let out of the bottle, and there is little evidence from anywhere in the world that it is possible to guide it in directions where it can do no further harm. Hence the pattern of failure that has characterised Bosnia for the past fourteen years in spite of huge

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[22] *New Yorker,* 26 September 2009, p. 44.

investments by the European Union and the US, and the fact that there has been so little substantive political progress in Lebanon. I wish I could be as confident as Davis that the deposits in his bank of social merit are as deep and abundant as he least paid lip service to the importance of establishing democracy. The fall of the tyrant did not lead to freedom and democracy; it led to some sort of chaotic semitheocratic hell, whose fires show few signs of cooling.

In *The File*, published in 1997,[23] Timothy Garton Ash gives a fascinating account of his efforts to understand, reconstruct, and come to terms with, the surveillance to which he had been subjected while living and working in the German Democratic Republic in the 1980s. In many respects, the archives that Kanan Makiya and his colleagues have collected in the Iraq Memory Foundation in Washington resemble the *Stasi* files: the records of generations of secret and covert activity—friends

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[23] *The File: a Personal History*, London, Harper-Collins, 1997. While commending this book, I am bound to say that Garton Ash's description of life in the GDR in the 1980s has little resonance with my own experience of visiting the country once or twice each year between 1971 and 1989. Most of my in-laws and acquaintances who lived there were irked rather than offended by a regime which offered a large array of carrots (secure employment, nominal charges for rent, utilities and public transport, comprehensive health and education, etc) in addition to the sticks which Garton Ash quite correctly describes.

spying on friends, even lovers spying on their lovers, husband on wives, wives on husbands. In addition, both archives bear witness to the extraordinary reach of the state and the relentlessness of its penetration into the lives of its citizens.

The importance of the material at the Iraq Memory Foundation for the history of Iraq is incalculable, particularly the insights which it gives on how the Ba'th Party was run, the extent of the Ba'thification to which Iraqi society was subjected. Given the nature of the material, it is possible to identify the structures and patterns, as well as the particular individuals, used to create instruments of totalitarian control. Two of my good friends, Dina Khoury and Joseph Sassoon, are working on the materials in this collection, and I eagerly await the results of their research. However, I think that there is something else that may also usefully be done.

Over the last twenty odd years, Truth Commissions have been formed in a variety of states emerging from conflicts, including Argentina, Chad, Chile, East Germany, East Timor, Ghana, Guatemala, Nigeria and South Africa, with the general objective, of constructing "a 'historic bridge' between 'a deeply divided past of untold suffering' and a 'future founded on the recognition of human rights'". In these countries, records like those in the possession of the Iraq Memory Foundation have begun to

play a vital role in processes of national reconstruction. In a recent article, [24] Greg Grandin notes ‘Efforts to get at the “truth” of past episodes of political violence would have two functions … They would, first, repair the psychic damage caused by repression, and second, prevent such repression from occurring in the future.’

Although the initial results of such attempts to respond to demands for justice in Latin America were less impressive than many had hoped, Grandin’s overall conclusion is that “subsequent Argentinian and Chilean history [sc after the reports of the various commissions] suggests that the fortification of liberal institutions and norms has indeed come about through the pursuit of criminal justice, both in national and international court systems … Human rights groups in both countries, made up largely of victims and their relatives, have refused to allow truth commissions to put ‘paid’ on the debate over the past … Courts have recently convicted a number of military officers, while hundreds more face trial.” In Guatemala, the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*, appointed by the United Nations, presented its findings in 1999. The head of the

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[24] Greg Grandin. ‘The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History and State Formation in Argentina, Chile and Guatemala’, *American Historical Review*, 110, 1, February 2005, 46-67.

Commission, a Professor of Public International Law at Humboldt University, Berlin, noted that 'the magnitude and irrational inhumanity of the violence … cannot be understood as a consequence of a confrontation between two armed parties but rather of the structure and nature of Guatemalan society [… the army carried out a] blind anticommunist crusade, without regard to a single juridical principle or the most basic ethical or religious values, resulting in a loss of all human morality'.[25]

Under the provisions of a law passed in 1991, the names of Stasi victims or innocent third parties had been blackened out on the photocopy of Garton Ash's file that he was given to read, as well as 'any passage containing personal information about other people that is not directly related to the inquiry'.[26] In some places—and I can imagine that such debates would be considered something of a luxury in Iraq at the moment—the question of whether or not to come to terms with the past by confronting it squarely has been avoided, on the grounds that such confrontations with reality open up more pain and contention, that they bring back ghosts whose presence hinders rather than facilitates national reconciliation. In Lebanon, for example, a young researcher of my

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[25] *Ibid,* 64-66.
[26] *The File …* 21.

acquaintance was surprised to find, in the course of visits in the 1990s, that it was considered tactless, even provocative, to discuss questions of responsibility or culpability for the events of the civil war between 1975 and 1990. In Iraq, where the identities of victims and oppressors are perhaps more clear-cut, I don't think it is particularly useful to postpone the process.

In many ways as disturbing is the culture that the combination of fear, complicity, and acceptance which regimes like those of Iraq and East Germany create. As Makiya wrote in 1989: "Fear is the cement that holds together [the] strange body politic in Iraq. … The public is atomized and broken up, which is why it can be made to believe anything. A society that used to revel in politics is not only subdued and silent, but profoundly apolitical. Fear is the agency of that transformation; the kind of fear that comes not only from what the neighbours might say, but that makes people careful of what they say in front of their children." Garton Ash estimated that according to the Stasi's own records for 1988, the last full year of the GDR, "about one in fifty adult East Germans had a direct connection with the secret police."[27]

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[27] *Republic of Fear …*, 275; *The File …*, 84.

Over time, mounting repression makes such a society accept, even think normal, the extraordinary restraints put upon its freedom. It is the *banality* of evil (the phrase comes from Hannah Arendt's description of Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in 1961), its mundaneness, which is often so difficult to comprehend. In *The File,* Garton Ash describes his graduate research into a similar culture—the 'People's Court' from the Nazi period: "I was appalled by the number of prosecutions that began with a denunciation, not by paid Gestapo informers but by ordinary people: a barber, denounced by a customer; a chemist, denounced by his shop assistant, a housekeeper, denounced by her employers; even someone informing on his own brother and a wife accusing her husband. These are all real cases … many of these trials led to a death sentence."[28]

After 1968, as Makiya himself recognised in 1989, the inner workings of Iraqi society became virtually impenetrable to ordinary citizens; now, at least for some parts of this period, we have an abundance of material. Thanks to digitisation and the Internet, the contents of the archive can be made widely available, although its sheer size may mean that the uninitiated will need sophisticated guides through the paper

[28] *The File …*, 44.

jungle. But we know that a definitive history of modern Iraq cannot be written without consulting it.

Of course, however much warning we may have of the awful nature of the records of such a regime, we may not be fully prepared for the horrors it contains, or the sea changes it will inevitably bring about. Garton Ash, whose experiences of a repressive society cannot, as he would be the first to claim, remotely compare with the terrible trials undergone by so many Iraqis, mused on “how a file opens the door to a vast sunken labyrinth of the forgotten past, but how, too, the very act of opening the door itself changes the buried artefacts, like an archaeologist letting in fresh air to a sealed Egyptian tomb.” In the opening words of L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*, the narrator says “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”[29] The restoration of civil society in Iraq will be a long and arduous march on an uphill road, but a vital component of this process must be the recognition, however great the temptation, that the past cannot be willed away. Coming to terms with the past, I believe, is the only way of confronting the present, and thinking about the possibilities of the future.

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[29] *The File …,* 108; L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, London, Penguin, 1997, 1 (first published in 1953).

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