Review on Sects and Religions in History of Iraq

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Abstract

Every tribe in Iraq has (Sunnis ,Sheia , the Yazidis, Turkmen, Armen,…) in its ranks. Every town and city have a mix of communities. My experience of Iraq, and that of all friends and relatives, is that of an amazing mix of coexisting communities, despite successive divide-and-rule regimes. For many centuries Iraq has been able to allow a religious, cultural and ethnic diversity to exist. Marred and disfigured as it undoubtedly has been from time to time by savage sectarian outbursts it has managed to stand the test of time. And now in a matter of months it is being swept away probably forever in an unimaginably brutal way. This is not only a terrible tragedy for each of those involved it is an historic tragedy for the world as yet another part of the finely woven tapestry of human complexity and coexistence is ripped to shreds. It is easier and quicker by far to destroy, and to call for destruction, than it is to build.

Keywords: City, Century, Mix.

I. Introduction

Iraq has been a Muslim-majority country since the time period surrounding the Prophet Muhammad's death. As such, the cultural and national identity of the country is deeply shaped by the religion. Faith in Islam is expressed on a daily basis in Iraq, through dress, dietary codes, regular prayers and language. For example, an Iraqi man who is dedicated to Islam in politics and society may grow their beard quite long to indicate their religious association. Reverence to Allah is also very evident in the way many people speak; it is common to slip praise into casual conversation. The Iraqi Muslim population is particularly complex as it has large populations of followers from both the Sunni and Shi'a sect. It is estimated that 55-60% of the population is Shi'a whilst roughly 40% are Sunni Muslims. Indeed, Iraq is the only Arab state in which Shi'a Muslims constitute the majority. However, many Sunnis dispute their minority status, and do not trust religious estimates. Most Shi'a Muslims are ethnically Arab, but there are some Turkomen and Kurdish Shi'a Muslims as well. Of the Sunni Muslim population, it is estimated 60% Arabs, 37.5% are Kurds, and 2.5% are Turkomen.[2]

1.1 Islam in Iraq

Iraq's Arab population is divided between Sunni Muslims and the more numerous Shi'i Muslims. These groups, however, are for the most part ethnically and linguistically homogenous, and—as is common throughout the region—both value family relations strongly. Many Arabs, in fact, identify more strongly with their family or tribe (an extended, patrilineal group) than with national or confessional affiliations, a significant factor contributing to ongoing difficulties in maintaining a strong central government. This challenge is amplified by the numerical size of many extended kin groups—tribal units may number thousands or tens of thousands of members—and the consequent political and economic clout they wield. Tribal affiliation among Arab groups has continued to play an important role in Iraqi politics, and even in areas where tribalism has eroded with time (such as major urban centres), family bonds have remained close. Several generations may live in a single household (although this is more common among rural families), and family-owned-and-operated businesses are the standard. Such households tend to be patriarchal, with the eldest male leading the family.
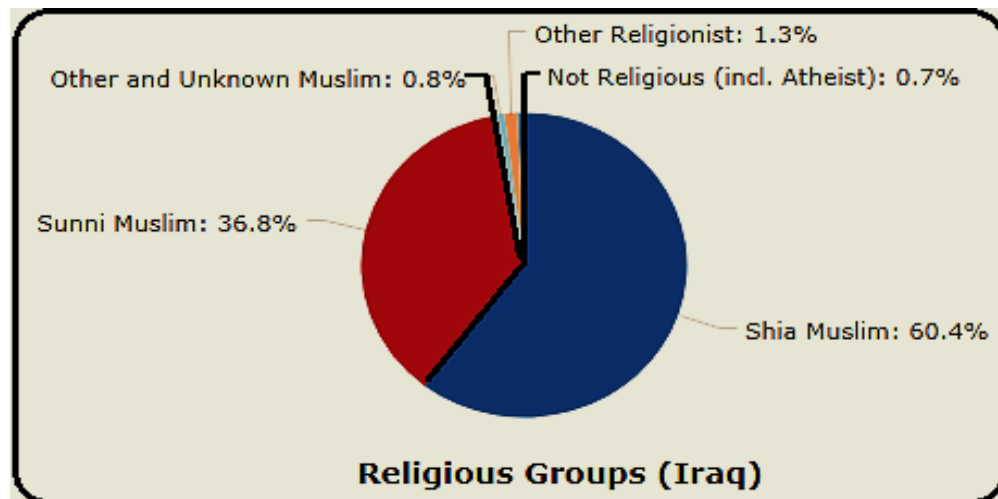
Figure 1. Religious Groups in Iraq

1.2 Religion of Iraq

Iraq is predominantly a Muslim country, in which the two major sects of Islam are represented more equally than in any other state. About three-fifths of the population is Shiʿi, and about two-fifths is Sunni. Largely for political reasons, the government has not maintained careful statistics on the relative proportion of the Sunni and Shiʿi populations. Shiʿis are almost exclusively Arab (with some Turkmen and Kurds), while Sunnis are divided mainly between Arabs and Kurds but include other, smaller groups, such as Azerbaijanis and Turkmen.
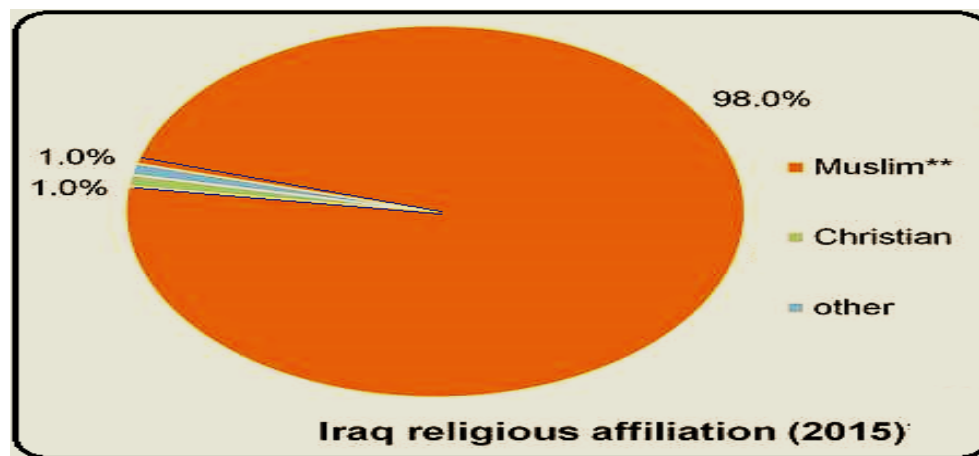

Figure 2. Religious in Iraq

1.3 The Sunnis

From the inception of the Iraqi state in 1920 until the fall of the government of Sadaam Hosain in 2003, the ruling elites consisted mainly—although not exclusively—of minority Sunni Arabs. Most Sunni Arabs follow the Ḥanafī school of jurisprudence and most Kurds the Shāfiʿī school, although this distinction has lost the meaning that it had in earlier times.

1.4 The Sheia

The Iraqi Shiʿah, like their coreligionists in Iran, follow the Ithnā ʿAsharī, or Twelver, rite, and, despite the preeminence of Iran as a Shiʿi Islamic republic, Iraq has traditionally been the physical and spiritual centre of Shiʿism in the Islamic world. Shiʿism's two most important holy cities, Najaf and Karbala, are located in southern Iraq, as is Kūfah, sanctified as the site of the assassination of ʿAlī, the fourth caliph, in the 7th century. Sāmarrāʾ, farther north, near Baghdad, is also of great cultural and religious significance to the Shiʿah as the site of the life and disappearance of the 12th, and eponymous, imam, Muḥammad al-Mahdī al-Ḥujjah. In premodern times southern and eastern Iraq formed a cultural and religious meeting place between

the Arab and Persian Shiʿi worlds, and religious scholars moved freely between the two regions. Even until relatively recent times, large numbers of notable Iranian scholars could be found studying or teaching in the great madrasahs (religious schools) in Najaf and Karbala. The Iranian cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, for instance, spent many years lecturing at Najaf while in exile. Although Sheia constituted the majority of the population, Iraq's Sunni rulers gave preferential treatment to influential Sunni tribal networks, and Sunnis dominated the military officer corps and civil service. Sheia remained politically and economically marginalized until the fall of Sadaam Hosain's regime. Since the transition to elective government, Sheia factions have wielded significant political power.

1.5 Kurds (Kurdish)

Although estimates of their precise numbers vary, the Kurds are reckoned to be the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, following Arabs, Turks, and Persians. There are important Kurdish minorities in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, and Iraq's Kurds are concentrated in the relatively inaccessible mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is roughly contiguous with Kurdish regions in those other countries. Kurds constitute a separate and distinctive cultural group. They are mostly Sunni Muslims who speak one of two dialects of the Kurdish language, an Indo-European language closely related to Modern Persian. They have a strong tribal structure and distinctive costume, music, and dance.
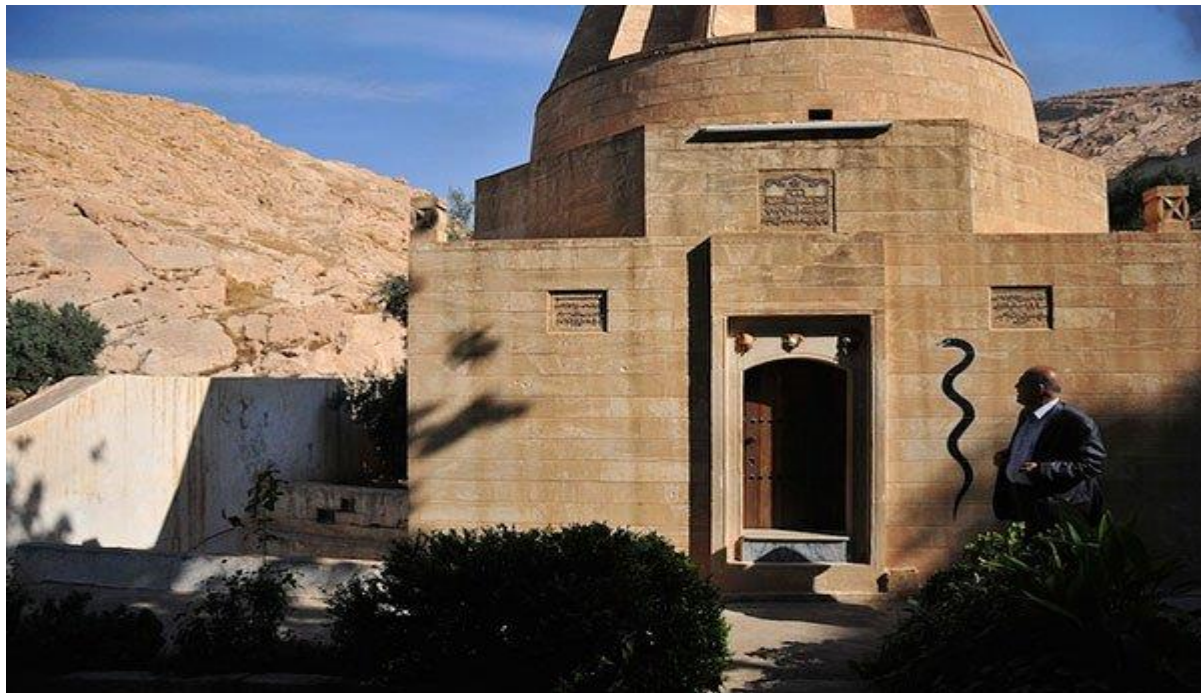

Figure 3. Kurdish religion

The Kurdish people were thwarted in their ambitions for statehood after World War I, and the Iraqi Kurds have since resisted inclusion in the state of Iraq. At various times the Kurds have been in undisputed control of large tracts of territory. Attempts to reach a compromise with the Kurds in their demands for autonomy, however, have ended in failure, owing partly to government pressure and partly to the inability of Kurdish factional groups to maintain a united front against successive Iraqi governments. From 1961 to 1975, aided by military support from Iran, they were intermittently in open rebellion against the Iraqi government, as they were during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and again, supported largely by the United States, throughout the 1990s.

After its rise to power, the Baʿth regime of Sadaam Hosain consistently tried to extend its control into Kurdish areas through threats, coercion, violence, and, at times, the forced internal transfer of large numbers of Kurds. Intermittent Kurdish rebellions in the last quarter of the 20th century killed tens of thousands of Kurds—both combatants and noncombatants—at the hands of government forces and on various occasions forced hundreds of thousands of Kurds to flee to neighbouring Iran and Turkey. Government attacks were violent and ruthless and included the use of chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians; such incidents took place at the village of Ḥalabjah and elsewhere in 1988.

Following a failed Kurdish uprising in the wake of the Persian Gulf War, the United States and other members of the coalition that it led against Iraq established a "safe haven" for the Kurds in an area north of latitude 36° N that was under the protection of the international community. Thereafter the Kurds were largely autonomous. Kurdish autonomy is upheld in the 2005 constitution, which designates Kurdistan as an autonomous federal region.

Figure 4. Spread of Kurds

1.6 The Iazidis

Estimates put the global number of Yazidis at around 700,000 people, with the vast majority of them concentrated in northern Iraq, in and around Sinjar.
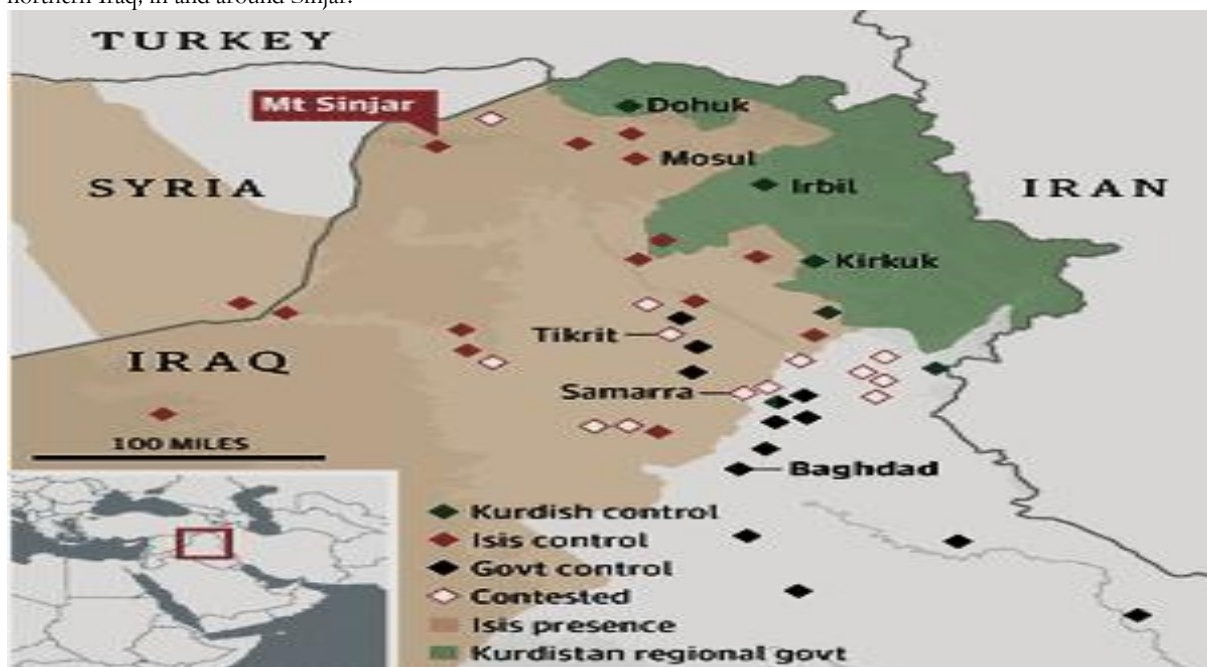

Figure 5. The Iazidis around Sinjar

A historically misunderstood group, the Yazidis are predominantly ethnically Kurdish, and have kept alive their syncretic religion for centuries, despite many years of oppression and threatened extermination. The ancient religion is rumoured to have been founded by an 11th century Ummayyad sheikh, and is derived from Zoroastrianism (an ancient Persian faith founded by a philosopher) , Christianity and Islam. The religion has taken elements from each, ranging from baptism (Christianity) to circumcision (Islam) to reverence of fire as a manifestation from God (derived from Zoroastrianism) and yet remains distinctly non-Abrahamic. This derivative quality has often led the Yazidis to be referred to as a sect.

At the core of the Yazidis' marginalization is their worship of a fallen angel, Melek Tawwus, or Peacock Angel, one of the seven angels that take primacy in their beliefs. Unlike the fall from grace of Satan, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Melek Tawwus was forgiven and returned to heaven by God. The importance of Melek Tawwus to the Yazidis has given them an undeserved reputation for being devil-worshippers – a notoriety that, in the climate of extremism gripping Iraq, has turned life-threatening. Under Ottoman rule in the 18th and 19th centuries alone, the Yazidis were subject to 72 genocidal massacres. More recently in 2007, hundreds of Yazidis were killed as a spate of car bombs ripped through their stronghold in northern Iraq. With numbers of dead as close to 800, according to the Iraqi Red Crescent, this was one of the single deadliest events to take place during the American-led invasion.

The Yazidis had been denounced as infidels by Al-Qaida in Iraq, a predecessor of Isis, which sanctioned their indiscriminate killing. *The rise of Islamic fundamentalism more broadly has pushed thousands of Yazidis to seek asylum in Europe. According to some estimates, 70,000 people, or about 15% of the Yazidi population in Iraq, fled the country. For a religion that does not accept converts and strongly discourages exogamy, the assimilation of Yazidi youth in Europe threatens the faith's continued existence. "People have gone out of fear of attacks or fear of racism. This makes it hard to protect the faith," said Baba Sheikh.*

1.7 Other Minorities

Small communities of Turks, Turkmen, and Assyrians survive in northern Iraq. The Lur, a group speaking an Iranian language, live near the Iranian border. In addition, a small number of Armenians are found predominantly in Baghdad and in pockets throughout the north.

Tragic that it took a vicious tyrant to bring about and enforce religious tolerance and one of the highest degrees of gender equality in the Muslim world. While I hated Saddam's regime, I'm inclined to think that he could have been controlled, were it not for the expansionist dream of the neocons, which soon became a nightmare.

1.8 Religious Minorities

Followers of other religions include Christians and even smaller groups of Yazīdīs , Mandaeans , Jews , and Bahāʾīs. The nearly extinct Jewish community traces its origins to the Babylonian Exile (586–516 BCE). Jews formerly constituted a small but significant minority and were largely concentrated in or around Baghdad, but, with the rise of Zionism, anti-Jewish feelings became widespread. This tension eventually led to the massive Farhūd pogrom of June 1941. With the establishment of Israel in 1948, most Jews emigrated there or elsewhere. The Christian communities are chiefly descendants of the ancient population that was not converted to Islam in the 7th century. They are subdivided among various sects, including Nestorians (Assyrians), Chaldeans—who broke with the Nestorians in the 16th century and are now affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church—and members of the Syriac Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches. About one million Christians lived in Iraq when the Iraq War began. The population has since dwindled to below 250,000, mostly due to poverty and violence by Muslim extremists.

1.9 The Main Difference Between Sheia and Sunni Muslims

Both Sunni and Sheia Muslims share the most fundamental Islamic beliefs and articles of faith. The differences between these two main sub-groups within Islam initially stemmed not from spiritual differences, but political ones. Over the centuries, however, these political differences have spawned a number of varying practices and positions which have come to carry a spiritual significance.

The division between Sheia and Sunni dates back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and the question of who was to take over the leadership of the Muslim nation. Sunni Muslims agree with the position taken by many of the Prophet's companions, that the new leader should be elected from among those capable of the job. This is what was done, and the Prophet Muhammad's close friend and advisor, Abu Bakr, became the first Caliph of the Islamic nation. The word 'Sunni' in Arabic comes from a word meaning 'one who follows the traditions of the Prophet.'...

The Sheia Muslims believe that following the Prophet Muhammad's death, leadership should have passed directly to his cousin/son-in-law, Ali. Throughout history, Sheia Muslims have not recognized the authority of elected Muslim leaders, choosing instead to follow a line of Imams which they believe have been appointed by the Prophet Muhammad or God Himself. The word 'Sheia' in Arabic means a group or supportive party of people. The commonly-known term is shortened from the

historical 'Sheia-t-Ali,' or 'the Party of Ali.' They are also known as followers of 'Ahl-al-Bayt' or 'People of the Household' (of the Prophet).

It is important to remember that despite all of these differences in opinion and practice, Sheia and Sunni Muslims share the main articles of Islamic belief and are considered by most to be brethren in faith. In fact, most Muslims do not distinguish themselves by claiming membership in any particular group, but prefer to call themselves simply, 'Muslims.'

2. Conclusions

The most serious sectarian and ethnic tensions in Iraq's modern history followed the 2003 US-led occupation, which faced massive popular opposition and resistance. The US had its own divide-and-rule policy, promoting Iraqi organizations founded on religion, ethnicity, nationality or sect rather than politics. Many senior officers in the newly formed Iraqi army came from these organizations and Saddam's army. This was exacerbated from many years ago, when sectarian groups in Syria were backed by the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar

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