

THE IRAQI IDENTITY: FAISAL'S UNSOLVED LEGACY

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Abstract. The problem of creating a sustainable national identity has been one of the major conflict sources, which Iraq has suffered from its early days onwards. This study examines the rationalistic roots of Iraq's identity problem, and how King Faisal's era (1921–1933), which encompassed the British mandate period, both contributed to this problem and tried to evade it. The aim of this study is to gain a basic understanding of Iraq's identity problem, which has been set in motion under King Faisal I, whose legacy is yet to be solved regarding the Iraqi peoples' feeling of belonging. Starting off with the problematique of a national identity framework in Iraq's case, this study elaborates on problems of defining the Iraqi identity, and sheds light on the major sources of which it is fed off; pan-Arab nationalism, tribalism, religion and language. The central argument of this study is that identity is a major indicator for power politics including other aspects of society.

Keywords: Iraq, national identity, Arabness, King Faisal I, power politics

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1. Introduction

It seems as if in Iraq no any identity proposal has ever met the people's feeling of belonging, which has since created a great conflict potential. At any rate, Iraq's national identity problem is considered one of a persistent kind (Marr 2012 [1985]: vii; Al-Qarawee 2010:34). Pondering on the roots of this conflict, one notices that the roots of the identity problem and by what the Iraqi identity is informed intersect. Thus, (pan-)Arab nationalism, tribalism, religion and language offer a medal with a flip side hinting at both the conflict source and the substance of identity. A quick train of thought gives us an overview about the status of the ingredients making up for the conflict source and substance of identity. In this

regard, Arab nationalism,¹ which was very prominent and dominant throughout the Arab-speaking world² did not work out in Iraq (Perthes 2015 [2015]:41) because Iraq was not a purely Arab state although the British planned it as such (Dodge 2003:10). Similarly, western secularism or Marxism could not maintain a sustainable and strong foothold in Iraqi identity because both were imported identity projects that in the end failed to unify Iraq's heterogeneous society. Although 98 percent of the Iraqis are Muslim, no any attempt to build a unifying Islamic identity has borne fruit so far. Rather, religious hardliners destroyed this common point of reference for identity, and political Islam has proved being another distinguishing element to alienate the political rival. This has not least been observable in the religious antagonistic mobilization of many Sunni Iraqis by ISIS.

A national identity requires the internalization of the whole of a people. This was likely the thought King Faisal I was haunted with during his reign. After his death, his legacy of Iraq lacking a national identity for its people remained greatly unsolved.³ For the most part of the twentieth century, creating a distinct Iraqi national identity stayed a fundamental challenge (Bernhardsson 2005:4). This challenge was inherent to the state's ontology because as Sherko Kirmanj writes "Iraq was an artificial creation of the British: its identity was manufactured during the process of state building" (Kirmanj 2010:54). Therefore, one cannot separate in Iraq's case the state-building process from the creation of a national identity. This and how the latter first took shape in British hands is best described by Toby Dodge: "Once British tutelage and supervision over the creation of Iraq gained international recognition through the League of Nations in 1920, it was perceptions of Iraqi society by its British rulers that had the major influence on how the state was built" (Dodge 2003:1).

Dodge goes even further saying that the conception of an Iraqi society was primarily a British imagination that "sprang in large part from their own understandings of the evolution of British society" (ibid.: 2). It can be thus said that in Iraq, after World War I, the state as well as its identity were imposed on the people inhabiting Iraqi lands. This imposition was a top-down process managed by foreign hands in agreement with a friendly government, which reconstructed the past alongside the "reigning ideological stance" (Bernhardsson 2005:5). The latter basically involves colonial thinking and modern approaches of self-determination and nationalism.⁴

¹ In Iraq, it was Sati al-Husri – Iraq's chief educator between 1921 and 1927, who was the founding father of the 'Arab nation' doctrine (Cleveland 1971:62–71; Dawisha 2009:79–80).

² In Iraq, pan-Arabism as a policy was initiated in the 1920s and culminated in the 1940s (Simon 1997:97).

³ "Even if one can speak of an Iraqi state, it is not yet possible to speak of an Iraqi nation. Iraq's present borders incorporate a diverse medley of peoples who have not yet been welded into a single political community with a common sense of identity" (Marr 2012:12–3).

⁴ Omar Abdel-Razek and Miriam Puttick note that "the emergence of the nation-state model in the Arab world was closely tied to the colonization process" (Abdel-Razek and Puttick 2016: 566).

Against this backdrop, this study aims at examining what has nourished the Iraqi national identity in a top-down process. Starting off with the problematique of a national identity framework in Iraq's case, this work elaborates on problems of defining the Iraqi identity, and sheds light on the major sources of which it is fed off; pan-Arab nationalism, tribalism, religion and language.

2. What is a national identity?

A national identity is a sense of belonging to a people, which is "contingent and relational" (Bernhardsson 2005:7). The latter is decisive because a national identity subjectively defines 'the self' of a people, and correspondingly 'its other,' for "without the damned there cannot be the saved" (Agnew 2006:185). In this relationality, the "national identity is defined by the social and territorial boundaries drawn to distinguish the collective self and its implicit negation, the other" (Sahlins 1989:271 cited in Bernhardsson 2005:7). Therefore, national identity "implies the legitimation of social order," a people's subjectivity attended by "common solidarities" (Lukitz 2005 [1995]:2), and its boundary-producing and self-consolidating external references (the other). However, some argue that the phenomenon of collective identity has transformed over time. For example, according to Shak Hanish, the identity of ancient Mesopotamians was defined by the place they lived at, and not by their ethnic belonging (Hanish 2008:43). Thus, the making of a national identity through ethnicity is a modern phenomenon, whereas language, geography, history, tradition/religion are older identificatory categories but unlikely to correspond to understandings of modern national belonging. More precisely, nationality and national identity are traced back to the peace of Westphalia in 1648, which had set in motion a process of nation-state building. However, applied on Iraq, this process of nationalization invaded the people's subjectivity from the 20th century onwards. In Liora Lukitz' words, what was to be imagined under an Iraqi national identity was "the idea pervading the national experience and determining the nation's character" as a "result of collective cultural traits which imbue the nation with a particular meaning and provide the basis for a viable and stable polity," what "overrides all other forms of loyalty" (Lukitz 2005 [1995]:73).

As it can be understood from here, a national identity bears a hegemonic claim over a people and on behalf of the people it represents. Adeed Dawisha, for example, approves this when saying "the frequency of references to the Arab character of Iraq dwarfed all other identity representations" (Dawisha 2009:235). This hegemonic claim is what has troubled the Iraqi people because its inclusiveness has been far too restrictive meaning that it excluded what was Iraqi *too*. In other words, the fact that Iraq has held an overwhelmingly Arab population, which the British took as their main orientation in the establishment of their mandate over Iraq (Ali 1993:229) and their installation of an Arab king, the ethnic and cultural diversity of Iraq had been disregarded from the very beginning of its creation.



Fig 1. Map titled "Mesopotamia. Racial Divisions." 1916. (Burdett 2015, Vol. 13: M. 325.13)

The map above shows the ethnic concentration of Mesopotamian peoples of 1916 encompassing later drawn borders of Iraq, which provided a hardly favorable pre-given for an ethnically mixed Iraqi society and thus for an agreed on sense of national belonging. For, such concentration (brown: Arabs; yellow: Kurds; green: other minorities) suggests a fertile soil for territorially anchored ethnic identities, which are either challenged or consolidated by state power depending on domestic power relations. Consequently, Iraq's ethnic distribution in relation with its unrepresentative power distribution (Kirmanj 2013:86) produces an impasse against developing a nationally united but equally open heterogeneous society. The latter raises the question of the dimension of power politics underlying Iraq's contested identity.

Accordingly, Harith Al-Qarawee writes that the Iraqi national identity has lacked consensus from the people over the question of what the Iraqi nation should have been (Al-Qarawee 2010:35). This has largely laid the ground for Iraq's identity still being contested and claimed by conflicting political actors. Therefore, one can say, Iraqi identity politics in any era reflect an episode of a power conflict (ibid.: 39). Bearing the power conflict of the 1920s in mind, the following sections

explore on which rationalistic bases identity politics have unfolded, and why the era of King Faisal I was of special relevance in this regard.

Iraq: An imposed state on a people with no national belonging

Although some argue that in the 1920s, “a nascent Iraqi identity was in the early stages” (Bernhardsson 2005:164), there is little evidence for believing that the people of Iraq responded accordingly to the top-down fashioning of an artificial identity. Rather, they had been imposed a state identity, with which they were prompted to identify, as attests Ali A. Allawi’s following remark:

The key to consolidating Faisal’s rule over the country and developing its national identity had been the development of the machinery of a central state and the establishment of a strong army. A large army was necessary to defend the unstable frontiers of the country, to introduce a measure of stability in a fragmented and often divided country, and to meet any domestic challenges to the state’s authority (Allawi 2014, 476).

In this vein, Iraqi identity was a firm part of the state-building project, and therefore not be read independently. As Charles Tripp notes, the change of the regime of power also “demanded new forms of identity” from the inhabitants of Iraq (Tripp 2007 [2000]:30). This new regime of power was occupied with seeking:

(...) personal trust, the determination to preserve inequality, whether materially or status-based, and the prominence of the disciplinary impulse, expressed primarily through the use of coercion. These features made any construction of an Iraqi identity ambiguous, since it was obvious that any such identity would be determined largely by individuals who had an overdeveloped sense of Iraq as an apparatus of power and an underdeveloped sense of Iraq as a community. The emergence of army officers during the 1930s as the supreme arbiters merely made these features crudely apparent (ibid.: 104).

Both Allawi’s and Tripp’s mentioned remarks indicate that the state elite – King Faisal with his military and bureaucratic personnel – as ‘social engineers’ were following into the footsteps of British colonizers in shaping the identity of Iraqis. King Faisal presents an interesting account to consider regarding the peoples’ acceptance of the new state and its identity offer. Whilst Tripp notes that Faisal “had the advantage, as an outsider, of not being associated with any particular faction or region of the country” (ibid.: 48), his remark makes one think that an outsider could have been perceived as a foreign invader or a puppet of the British. This partially happened. For example, Tripp further notes that “Sunni *sayyid* families in Iraq tended to regard him as an interloper” despite belonging to the same sect, and Kurds did barely support him,⁵ whereas the Shiites had little

⁵ Kirmanj notes that Shaykh Mahmud, who was a Kurdish leader, fought against Faisal because he was an Arab king (Kirmanj 2010:45); Ali writes that the Kurds of Sulaimaniya boycotted the 1921 referendum on Faisal’s kingship unlike a few in Kirkuk and those in Arbil who accepted Faisal as king (Ali 1993:232–3) although their acceptance is considered to be the work of Captain Lyon, British Assistant Political Officer of Arbil (ibid.: 255).

respect for him due to his Sunni identity (Tripp 2007 [2000]:48). What is probably more important is that Faisal perceived the Shiites as the greatest threat to his rule, wherefore he opposed the idea of a Kurdish separation that would have greatly undermined the Sunni standing vis-à-vis the Shiites (Ali 1993:255–6, 470). Yet, Reeva S. Simon writes both Arab Sunnis and Shiites respected him for his religious lineage and his Arabness (Simon 1997:88). Kirmanj, though accepting that this had initially been the case (Kirmanj 2013:39), paints a clearer picture when he says:

Sunni-dominated areas voted in favor of the king. However, the Shi'a province of Basra initially rejected the nomination, approving it only after assurances were given that their local demands, including self-rule, would be taken into consideration. In the province of Kirkuk, the Kurds and Turkomans rejected Faysal's nomination (Kirmanj 2010:44).

As it can be understood from here, ethnic and sectarian identities were pre-existing as Faisal took power, and they were dispersed over regions, which has greatly contributed to the localization of identity, giving space to regional micro identities. And indeed, all major groups lobbied for the existence of their micro identity. A special case concerning this is the Mosul settlement of 1926, where groups of urban Kurdish intellectuals gathered to find ways to secure their Kurdish identity (Tripp 2007 [2000]:62).⁶ Kurds and Assyrians both deemed political threats to the Iraqi regime, were often suppressed militarily (Ali 1993:414–5). Incorporated into the new Iraqi state despite their own nationalist aspirations, the Kurds rebelled against Iraqi authority from the early 1920s, and were held in check during the 1920s and 1930s (Simon 1997:92–3).

It has already been mentioned that Faisal and his governing apparatus followed into the footsteps of the British, however, they did not fully replace them at that time. It was still an era of collaboration in mutual dependency under Faisal.⁷ This collaboration regarding Iraq's identity had not always been unproblematic for either side had its own imagination of Iraq and its society. The British opposed any identity shift from the Iraq-centric or nation-state focus to pan-Arab nationalism (Kirmanj 2010:44), which suggested the solidarization of all Arabs and was inherent in King Faisal's doctrine of Hashemite unity (Simon 1997:89).

Earlier the king of Syria and subsequently the king of Iraq, Faisal was sympathetic to the idea of ruling all Arabs under the Hashemite umbrella.⁸ However, this was at odds with the traditional British colonialist strategy of rule; *divide et impera* – divide and rule. This chasm in the collaboration had several implica-

⁶ For a detailed consideration, see, for example: Ofra Bengio, "Contextualizing the Kurdish national project: the failed Iraqi nation-state thesis," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2018.

⁷ Dodge refers to the role of British advisers within Iraqi politics (Dodge 2003:19), and likewise Ali highlights King Faisal's pressure on the British against their endorsement of Kurdish ambitions (Ali 1993:228).

⁸ Allawi notes that Faisal did not have a determined vision of an Arab world under his rule, however, he aspired political influence in Arab-speaking lands beyond the Hijaz (Allawi 2014, 162).

tions. First, it fueled the fight for hegemony over Iraq's identity both on the governmental level as on the society level, which highlights the power conflict reflection of Iraq's identity problem. Second, it unmasked and sedimented the fact that Iraq was an artificial framework manufactured by foreign hands. Third, it further alienated the public sphere from governmental authority. Fourth, it pushed the people toward old-established tribal and religious identities, which had to some extent sheltered them from the new insecurity and instability of unfamiliar identity politics at the governmental level. Given the fact that the state level was anything but representative of Iraqi people, the determination of Iraq's national identity turned out to be a lasting impasse. Nonetheless, Iraq's seemingly one-way road of identity shaping was not only a flaw of governance but too interlaced in the pre-given conditions, which the population had to offer.

3. Problems of defining Iraqi national identity and the prism of micro identities

There are four major problems in defining the Iraqi national identity. First, there are different and conflicting historiographies of Iraq⁹ related to the different subjectivities each ethnic/religious/linguistic group defines for its own. More precisely, Kirmanj conceptualizes the Iraqi identity as a clash among three competing nationalisms: pan-Arab, Iraqi, and Kurdish (Kirmanj 2010:43). Consequently, the first major problem in defining the Iraqi national identity is conflicting *and* intersecting nationalisms. Second, the existence of conflicting nationalisms prevents not only a national unity but also the determination of an external antagonism, however, the creation of a clear-cut 'other' potent of stabilizing an Iraqi national 'self' is indispensable for a sustainable national identity. Third, given the lack of national unity, the three nationalisms function as trajectories for further micro identities such as tribal, sectarian, and territorial-regional identity, amongst which the latter is less politically effective (Marr 2010:19).

On the other hand, these micro identities can also embed each other. For example, Phebe Marr argues that in case of the Kurds, their counter-hegemonic identity was elusive to assimilation due to their strong peripheral existence. Because Kurds have lived in large numbers within "geographic concentration" and "mountain inaccessibility" preserving "cultural and linguistic identity" (Marr 2012

⁹ Among which the Arab nationalist one had been the most prevailing, as reads Simon's take on it: "Teachers were provided, therefore, with explicit instructions on how to teach history detailed in the curriculum guides provided by the Ministry of Education. The "study of history is glorious," they were told, "filled with life, great and exciting tales, sentiments to awaken national pride, free from complexities not loaded with names, dates, and facts which oppress the memory in such a manner as to restrict the understanding of the course of history" (Simon 1997:95). Lukitz speaks of "different memories and different notions of identity," which various social groups in Iraq have had (Lukitz 2005:8). Different historiographies produce different references for 'the self,' which Haddad emphasizes as "the competition of myths and symbols" (Haddad 2011:17).

[1985]:16). This suggests that the territorial/regional identity can effectively complement the concentration and consolidation of more dominant micro identities such as the ethnic or linguistic identity. So, Kurds had been able to protect their tribal, territorial-regional, and cultural identities given their structural conditions in Iraq.

Fourth and foremost, the epistemological dilemma of the Iraqi national identity has had the greatest ramifications so far. That is to say the characteristic elements forging the identity, say secularism for example, are also able of decomposing it (Lukitz 2005 [1995]:141). In this vein, Simon notes: “As a secular umbrella, the ideology of Arab nationalism could theoretically accommodate sectarian ethnic and religious identification so long as the adherents professed loyalty to the state and adopted ‘Arab culture’ as their own” (Simon 1997:103–4). Nonetheless, this could suggest that in order to maintain one identity able of encompassing all people of Iraq, other identities such as aforementioned micro identities have to be either disciplined to a docile minimum under the ‘agreed-upon hegemonic identity’ or they have to be totally disclaimed, which both have proved deeply problematic in Iraq’s young history. Moreover, as Volker Perthes points out, Arab nationalism, which had been the most important political ideology throughout the 20th century, seems to have lost its impact (Perthes 2015 [2015]:42).

3.1. Pan-Arab nationalism as a mutual denominator: a curse or a blessing?

Both Simon and Lukitz mention that the Iraqi national identity has been marked by Arabness compared to other forms of nationalism (e.g. Iraqis or Mesopotamians) (Lukitz 2005 [1995]:4; Simon 1997:88). Simon goes even further arguing that “the Ministry of Education in Baghdad, attempted to amalgamate the Sunni minority elite with the ethnic and religious minorities and the Shi’i majority via the glue of Arab nationalism in order to forge a pan-Arab identity for the Iraqis” (ibid.: 88). In fact, there is sufficient evidence for believing that pan-Arabism was an effective tool to assimilate other nationalisms and micro identities for the sake of a ‘binding national loyalty’ embodied in the Arab Iraqi national identity.¹⁰ Accordingly, it is safe to say that Arab nationalism had determined the hegemonic discourse over the Iraqi identity throughout the 1920s and 1930s despite some officially granted cultural rights.

One effect of Arab nationalism as being the hegemonic discourse led to its instrumentalization for political disciplination. Shiites, for instance, had sometimes been accused of belonging to the Iranian nation what “was a natural

¹⁰ For example, “one old Turkoman explained to M. De Wirsén, “Before, we had been Turks, at present we are Arabs.” (cited in Shields 2004:56). Similarly assimilated were the Jews. For example, the Jewish “Murad Michael’s first poem, published in 1922, was an ode of praise and love for Iraq. To these Jews there was no conflict between the Jewish religion and Iraqi nationality. They considered themselves to be Jewish Arabs and did not identify with Zionism.” (Simon 1997:101).

concomitant of the imposition of the Arab nationalist ideology” (ibid.: 92).¹¹ Likewise, Kurds due to their ambitions for autonomy were viewed as potential traitors by pan-Arab nationalists (Ali 1993:396). Such nationalist instrumentalization of the perceived ‘other’ culminated in a Jacobean suspicion, which triggered a litmus test whenever necessary (Dawisha 2009:74; Kirmanj 2013:54–55, 250). Nevertheless, in the case of the Kurds, the majority position of pan-Arabism was challenged by Kurdish nationalism. In an extract from the British Air Intelligence Report covering May–July 1930, it is stated that Kurds see in themselves “a superior race to the Arabs” because their skin was brighter, and because they knew that Arabs could not have been ‘the rulers of Iraq’ without British assistance (Burdett 2015, Vol. 7, 802).

However, Iraq’s ethnic and cultural diversity and counter identities could not pose an effective antipole to pan-Arab nationalism, which envisaged a supremacy for the Arab ethnicity, and propagated a unity of the Arab nation throughout the Middle East. Why Faisal was sympathetic to pan-Arabism was because it lended legitimacy to his vision of a Hashemite unity with him being the leader of Arabs. Elevating Iraq from a member to the leader of the Arab world (Dawisha 2009: 136), however, undermined Iraq’s local concerns (Simon 1997:95; Marr 2010: 22). Nevertheless, Arab nationalism found resonance early on in Iraq.

For example, the National Scientific Club and the *al-Ahd* (the Covenant) in Baghdad were voicing the importance of Arab identity and culture (Tripp 2007 [2000]:26).¹² Moreover, the global rise of nationalism in the early 20th century contributed to the appeal of Iraqi Arabness as a secular identity, however, its Arab notion had a largely alienating effect on Kurds and Turkomans (ibid.: 64), whereby its secular notion fueled Shiite sectarianism (Dawisha 2009:134).¹³ More so, when considered that these groups were frequently regarded as potential separatists in a time, in which nothing was holier than the unity of Iraq.

Given that Faisal and the Sunni elites in military and bureaucracy favored an Arab nationalism at odds with British post-colonial interests, mass protest against the Mandate in Iraq¹⁴ prompted the British early on to redefine their policy (Dodge

¹¹ Accusations were also followed by discriminatory practices. For example, “the Iraqi government forbade Shi’i proselytization, reduced the economic significance of al-Najaf by limiting its grain exports to Saudi Arabia, and passed Nationality Laws in 1924 and 1927 that prohibited employment by non-Iraqis in certain jobs generally held by Shi’is.” (Retrieved from Simon 1997:92).

¹² This group together with *al-Fatat* (the youth) provided the most important niches for pan-Arab nationalism, from which many of Faisal’s “political and military advisory staff” was recruited (Allawi 2014:33, 164–5). Faisal himself made contact with senior cadres of both groups during his time in Syria (ibid.: 53, 56), and he later became a member of *al-Fatat* (ibid.: 163).

¹³ Importantly, the Iraqi Arab Shiites by 1920 had developed a political ideology that promoted independence from foreign rule and an Islamic state from Kurdistan to the Persian Gulf. See: ibid.: 87. “By [1920] the Shi’i mujtahidin, having developed a political program that opposed any foreign occupation of Iraq, called for an Islamic state (...)” (ibid.: 91).

¹⁴ Anti-British protest broke out even before Faisal came to power. Historical records prove how the British were troubled with foremost Kurdish unrest. See, for example: Burdett 2015, Vol. 5:1914–1920:434; Ali 1993:66–74.

2003:9; Allawi 2014:356). For the more previously British-appointed positions fell to Faisal's new elites, the more the British had to turn to other groups seeking power. As such, tribal leaders had been consulted by the British to counterbalance pan-Arab nationalists (Kirmanj 2010:44; Kirmanj 2013:41). As part of the British redefinition of Iraqi politics, they installed institutions through which they aimed at further controlling Iraq. However, keeping the latter secret aimed at making the public believe that Iraq was an independent nation or had in Dodge's words "the appearance of a de jure national polity" (Dodge 2003:10).

Despite being two conflicting parties, British colonialists as well as the house of Hashemite Sharifians were like-minded in thinking that Arabness would pave the way to a common sense of belonging.¹⁵ But they were disregarding three important facts. First, Iraqi people were not entirely Arab but too Kurdish, Turkoman, Jewish, and Persian.¹⁶ Second, religion offered an even richer diversity. Within the two percent Christian population; Nestorians and Chaldeans, and too Jacobites, Assyrians, and other groups such as Yazidis and Sabians were members of the Iraqi nation. Third, the British and collaborationist approach totally missed out to factor in the centuries-old legacy of the Ottoman *millat* system. The latter was namely a concept of citizenship based on religious belonging, and did not consider ethnicity.

In spite of everything, being Arab and referring to Arab nationalism was what had lended legitimacy to Faisal and his son Ghazi's rule over a country they did not belong to (Baram 1994:295; Marr 2010:20). This was partially based on Iraq's autonomous regional character under Ottoman rule, which was predominantly Arab. Marr explains that "... some organizational cohesion to territories between the Tigris and Euphrates, centered on Baghdad, and this may have imparted a sense of Iraqi territoriality to some living within this (mainly Arab) area" (Marr 2010:19). However, the lines drawn at the conference in Cairo in 1921 incorporating former Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul into one nation-state was a rejection of such sense of territoriality. As Simon aptly puts: "The new country of Iraq was a fragmented society, a territory of ethnic and religious diversity, where some groups worked for independence and some paid nominal allegiance to whoever collected the taxes" (Simon 1997:87). Amongst the latter was also the vast majority of the population, which was poor and illiterate, and thus deemed "matters of identity an esoteric subject of which they had no real

¹⁵ "During the war and its immediate aftermath the British saw the nationalist movement as a positive tool to deploy against the Ottoman Empire and then as a way of unifying Iraq's disparate population. But as the movement grew in power and its demands increasingly constrained the ability of the British to act, they increasingly perceived it as irrational and dangerous." (Dodge 2003:22).

¹⁶ Allawi notes that a number of Persians were residing in the "shrine towns" of Iraq (Allawi 2014:368).

cognizance, and to which they accorded little importance, let alone much loyalty” (Dawisha 2009:140).¹⁷

So, one can say that the making of an Iraqi nation-state to some extent eroded previous loyalties like territorial and regional senses of belonging, whereby others like ethnicity prevailed as strong components of identification. Having said all this, one can conclude that the British collaboration with Faisal led to a social engineering that selected a set of pre-givens out of the post-war Iraqi situation, and Arabness was a central finding thereof. A reinforced loyalty as Iraqi identity provided a state-bound belonging to Iraq’s people “came to be synonymous with ‘Iraqi’ identity” (Marr 2010:22).

The long-lived effects of pan-Arab nationalist hegemony can still be traced in contemporary Iraq as a recent examination of Iraqi schoolbooks attests. On this account, Achim Rohde laments the following: “Contemporary Iraqi textbooks on religious education and Arab-Islamic history do not emphasize or examine in detail the existence of multiple and conflicting narratives or the great social and cultural diversity that exists in Iraqi society.” (Rohde 2018:295). Likewise, Fanar Haddad laments that sectarian identities have been largely tabooed in modern Iraq (Haddad 2011:1).

3.2. Tribalism, religion, and language:

genuine sources of micro identities challenging the national collectivity

Marr argues that even today kinship is “the fundamental basis of identity for most Iraqis, cutting across other forms of identity” (Marr 2010:16), which calls for caution on the hybridization of identity across heterogeneous components informing it.¹⁸ However, the importance of one’s tribal identity is surely sedimented in Iraq’s patrimonial society, which dates back longer than the establishment of Iraq as a state. Therefore, modernity could not abolish tribalism, which makes it a challenge to a national belonging, a macro identity. This is in particular argued in the case of Kurds. Hanna Yousif Freij, for example, states that “the existence of a national consciousness among the Kurds in Iraq is not sufficiently strong to overcome ideological identification and group centrism based on tribal identity; thus, loyalty is ultimately given to the tribal communal group” (Freij 1997:104). Likewise, Peter Sluglett views tribalism as a hurdle to overcome for an Iraqi national identity, and cites a contemporary report of that era:

¹⁷ “While the British had emphasized national identity and self-determination in their arguments, the people – even under their watchful eyes – rejected their arguments, emphasizing that survival and prosperity were their first priorities” (Retrieved from Shields 2004:58).

¹⁸ “In the past, as today, diversity – of terrain, of resources, and, above all, of people – has been the chief characteristic of the territory and inhabitants that constitute contemporary Iraq. In fact, three elements of this past have been most important in forming the collective memory and consciousness of twenty-first-century Iraqis and shaping their institutions and practices: the civilization of ancient Mesopotamia, the Arab-Islamic heritage, and the legacy of the Ottoman Empire” (See: Marr 2012:3–4).

[C]oncerning the political life of the country it is difficult to speak. An Iraq nationality has hardly yet developed. Men feel the ties of loyalty to their tribe or their town or family more than to their country. A patriotic sense of public duty is often lacking (Iraq Report 1924:17 in Sluglett 2007:63).

Language on the other hand constitutes for the most serious demographic division. Arabic speakers constitute 75 to 80 percent of the population; Kurdish speakers, 15 to 20 percent (Marr 2012 [1985]:13). Consequently, pan-Arabism was greatly disturbed by a large mass of Kurdish-speakers. Political or apolitical, Kurds have traditionally presented a materialized denial to an Arab nationalist framework for an Iraqi national identity, undercutting the epistemological basis for such a collective subjectivity. That is why the British on the course of nationalist rise in the region considered Kurdish self-determination a chance to keep Faisal and his nationalist circles¹⁹ under control (Ali 1993:304, 467), and balance pan-nationalism as following letter of October 29, 1918, headed “Kurdistan” unveils:

In considering the question of self determination of the races of Eastern Turkey (...) it becomes necessary to study the history & characteristics of the Kurd & Armenian races (...) More especially is this necessary in the case of the Kurds (...) Also it is of the utmost importance from the point of view of British interests to determine from the characteristics and moral value of the various races whether it is possible to utilize them to create a solid block of friendly peoples from the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea to thwart the Pan Turanian movement of the Turks which if left unchecked would certainly spread Eastward & in time threaten the safety of our Indian Empire (Burdett 2015, Vol. 5:18–9).²⁰

The aspect of religion is yet another important factor to consider when deliberating on Iraq’s national identity because it extends its role as a civil trait. Lukitz notes that

(...) during the 1920s and the 1930s, the roles of the ‘ulama’ in the Shi‘i provinces, the Naqshabandi and Qadiri sheikhs in the Kurdish areas, the patriarchs in the Christian communities, and the chief rabbi in the Jewish one were not just religious. Their multi-dimensional role was a natural extension of their role in Ottoman times. These religious authorities were the guardians of the collective identities of their communities and part of their cultural heritage (Lukitz 2005 [1995]:98).

This underscores the traditional autonomy, which religious communities enjoyed under Ottoman rule, and which they were not ready to sacrifice for the foreign concept of a state-centric secular national identity.

¹⁹ Allawi considers Faisal’s adherence to nationalism a pragmatic choice, and names it a “(pragmatic) moderate Arab nationalism” (Allawi 2014:163, 168). However, one could contend that his biography hints at a rather convinced Arab nationalism.

²⁰ Letter written by British Colonel Francis Richard Maunsell. See: Burdett 2015, Volume 5:1914–1920:126. Another document of June 21st, 1921, a telegram from Percy Cox, the High Commissioner of Mesopotamia, to the British Secretary of State for the Colonies reveals that Kurds were envisaged for getting armed against neighboring nation-states. See: Ibid., Vol. 6, 1921–1927:18–9.

Faisal's pragmatism

Despite being an authoritarian monarch, Faisal proved some governmental pragmatism when he employed Shiites in some official posts often at the unease of his ministers, for he knew well that alienating Shiites would breed longlasting conflicts for his national identity project (Allawi 2014:479; Lukitz 2005 [1995]: 72; Kirmanj 2013:53, 58) if only for their number.²¹ However, this was at the same time an attempt at preventing any effective Shiite leadership (Simon 1997:91). Likewise, he employed some Kurds in administrative structures (Allawi 2014: 535). Both the introduction of Shiites and Kurds – though in restricted numbers – into low leadership posts mollified ethnic and social tensions (Marr 2012:59). Also in this context lies Faisal's concession of granting cultural rights like the maintenance of Kurdish or Turkish as official languages in areas like Kirkuk (Burdett 2015, Vol. 7:706–7; Ali 1993:259).

Unlike his coeval Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, Faisal did not reject the role of religion sacrificing it for science. On the contrary, he thought that religion is compatible with science, and more importantly, fundamental for identity construction. Allawi even cites him stating “we will have a modern-minded religious class” (Allawi 2014:517).

Despite all of Faisal's unifying measures through whatever means ranging from military control to the imposition of a hardcore nationalist syllabus in education, his regime failed to let the public sphere to complement the nationalization task. Therefore, throughout the decade-long reign of Faisal, national identity remained a matter of a top-down process with no expectations from the people other than obedience. This became not least evident in Faisal's call on Arab Iraqis to follow their ‘first duty’ that is to embrace Kurdish Iraqis as their brothers for the sake of the Iraqi nation (Ali 1993:336). However, a national identity requires the participation and internalization of a people.

In other words, the top-down process should have initiated nothing more than a stepping stone for the Iraqi society to define itself via the democratization of institutions instead of remaining an authoritarian directive of the state for decades. Marr claims that “Iraq's political class could have put more focus, over time, on these new institutions to embed them in the public consciousness and make them part of Iraq's new identity” (Marr 2010:21). Likewise, Kirmanj argues that “the lack of democratic institutions and the resurfacing and intensifying of the clash of identities halted the process of integration.” (Kirmanj 2010:54). According to Perthes, the latter unfolded on the course of the First Gulf War against Iran (1980–88) if ever (Perthes 2000:203), whereas Kirmanj points out that the Kurds' and Arabs' perception of the British as their mutual other facilitated the national integration process, which soon dwindled away (Kirmanj 2013:122–123).

²¹ The Arab Shi'a of the central and southern part of the country were the largest group, which made up 53 percent of the population in 1919 and 56 percent in 1932 (Marr 2010:22).

Overall this study highlights that the problematic legacy of Iraq's national identity is rooted in the era of King Faisal as he himself once admitted the failure of his identity project as follows:

Iraq is one of those countries that lack religious, communal and cultural unity, and as such it is divided upon itself; its power dispersed....The Arab Sunni government rules over a Kurdish population, the bulk of which is ignorant, that is led by people with personal ambitions who use the [Kurds'] ethnic difference to advocate secession (Dawisha 2009:275).

Taken Faisal's words as an indicator for the Iraqi zeitgeist of the 1920s, Cleveland's description of Iraqis as not being "universally receptive either to the British or to their new king from Hejaz" (Cleveland 1971:59–60) seems to be valid. Although Faisal was not an "anti-Kurd" (Ali 1993:396) or seriously hostile to any other component of Iraq's population, his pragmatism conditioned him to frequently discipline the expression of ethnic or cultural autonomy. Therefore, it is difficult to reach a final judgement over Faisal policy conduct regarding the goal of a unifying identity for the people of Iraq. Rather, Faisal's policies in accordance with the historical conditions embedding his decision-making seem to best reflect a dilemma, which has proved being both a curse *and* a blessing for the people of Iraq.

4. A contemporary assessment in lieu of a conclusion

Iraq's identity problem does not only indicate the shortages of an artificially produced national belonging but too what went wrong throughout its foundation. The identity problem of Iraq is therefore a remarkable cross-sectional indicator to view social, political, and economic misgovernment that has produced somewhat chronic problems to the people. This study aimed at examining Iraq's identity problem from its roots, starting off with the rule of King Faisal I, and deliberating on its visible continuations. Delivering a cure for the studied problem here is not a goal of this study, however, one can make some broad and legitimate comments on a better Iraqi future.

One aspect is to demilitarize the Iraqi identity, which had been too long in the hands of the military, and thus gained a military tone capable of delegitimizing domestic deviations from a state-centric ideal of the Iraqi identity. This is to disable political violence from being an identity-producing practice.²² A historical review of Iraq's identity problem unmistakably shows that political violence lies at

²² Political violence has had important ramifications on the national identity of Iraq, however, this is not the place to draw on it. Yet, it is noteworthy to bear in mind that Tripp described political violence as "the most prominent state-performing process". See Charles Tripp "The State as an Always-Unfinished Performance: Improvisation and Performativity in the Face of Crisis". *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2018, 337–42, doi:10.1017/S0020743818000247, p. 340.

the heart of the vicious circle blocking the people of Iraq to thrive a common sense of belonging.

Another facet of the problem and solution lies at the the constitutional level. The Iraqi constitution must be respected by all political actors in Iraq. That is to say that the constitution should never be sacrificed for political opportunism. Rather, it should lay a binding ground alongside which Iraqi politicians orientate themselves. The constitution – once agreed upon – should perform its role as a disciplining public accord, which prevents any serious attempt to exclude a social group in Iraq.

Not to forget, as the history of Iraq has taught us many times, foreign powers should be prevented from both direct and indirect influence on the people of Iraq. Otherwise there will always be a high risk for public unrest and separation movements bearing at worst potential for sparking civil war. The strongest antidote to foreign intervention and civil war is surely a unifying sense of national belonging for Iraqis.

Finally, the state is prompted to provide cultural platforms on which all people regardless of their ethnic or religious belonging are invited to come together and ideally connect. This is important when accepted that identity is frequently shaped by practice. Such platforms should give the people of Iraq the opportunity to publicly and confidently disclose and communicate their micro identities to each other. When objective platforms are given to the people to express themselves in a peaceful manner, it is unlikely that they present their identities in a way that projects a feeling of antagonistic superiority toward each other. To the contrary, when for example Shiite and Sunni festivities are celebrated together and social exclusion is mollified, a softer tone will overwhelm the public debate on the Iraqi identity.

In short, when politics are focused on the needs of people instead of their alleged differences, a path towards social reconciliation will be paved because there is a lot in Iraq's history, for which all its people fought.²³ This study strongly argues that the responsibility lies with the political decision-making class. After it accomplishes the feasible for a stable national identity, the responsibility will be passed on the people of Iraq, who are the final determinants of the sense of their belonging. Put it differently, if the political class ceases to practice identity politics, and instead adopts a discourse of unity in diversity – desecuritizing and demilitarizing their language on identity – chronic animosities will first lessen, and later vanish from the public sphere. This is due to the practice of identity politics that will lack to reproduce animosities.

²³ Rohde considers e.g. the resistance against colonialism as a framework of cooperation (Rohde 2018:296). An example is the rebellion of 1920 (Allawi 2014:356–7) or the Sunni-Shiite common standing against “Ikhwan belligerency in 1922” (Dawisha 2009:79; Allawi 2014: 390).

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