

The Formation of Modern Iraq: Society, Culture and Domestic and Foreign Influence

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Introduction: A Thorough Analysis of the Development of Iraq's Modern Socio-Economic Structure

The Modern Structure of Iraq: The Intellectual and Political Influence 1869–1914 was originally a Master's dissertation written under the supervision of Professor Kamal Mazhar Ahmed. The degree was awarded with distinction following the viva at Baghdad University's Faculty of Arts. The dissertation tackles crucial issues amid an increasingly excessive academic interest in politics, as well as economics, albeit to a lesser extent.

Despite the relative increase in the volume of studies tackling social, economic, and cultural developments in modern and contemporary Iraq, such interest has neither been sufficient nor fulfilling, particularly in terms of cultural and intellectual aspects. More importantly, there has been an absence of analytical

study of the role of the modern social and economic structure in the formation of ideas and ideologies prevalent among the various Iraqi segments. The exception, as relevant as it is, lies in the valuable analysis included in some sound publications such as Hanna Batatu's renowned book on Iraq: *Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements from Ottomans to the Republic* ⁽²⁾

Several academic studies have attempted to explain the reason behind this absence, arguing that domestic socio-economic factors hindered the emergence of an intellectual revolutionary spirit in Iraqi society, thus leaving the door wide open for external factors. The authors of these studies failed to bear in mind that ideas are primarily a means rather than an end, and that the

¹ Iraqi academic and researcher in historical and political studies.

² Hanna Batatu, "Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements from Ottomans to the Republic", translated by Afif Al-Razaz, (Beirut: Arab Research Foundation, 1998).

socio-economic backgrounds of the various segments of the Iraqi people dictate their own perceptions of these ideas in accordance with their aspirations. This is because the image through which the beliefs and ideas are perceived, interpreted, brought to life, mobilized, and lived is highly influenced by the ripples of the social foundation. And even if such beliefs and ideas managed to prove a high level of independence, whether for the sanctity of their source or for being snatched from advanced societies, they eventually manifest through a continuously-changing series of local notions in society.

Within this context, Mohamed Jabbar Ibrahim al-Jammal's book is almost the first serious study

of the development of the socio-economic structure and its impact on modern Iraqi political thought. The author argues that internal factors played the bigger role in this regard, contradicting all studies and research on the subject, which have primarily focused on the role of foreign influence. Al-Jammal's book also tackles the origin and strength of the modern structure of Iraq, as well as the relations between its elements, represented by westernized intellectuals and elements from industrial and commercial environments. The author thus manages to identify the sociological nature of the authority that holds the keys to power in Iraq's modern and contemporary history.

Overview

The book is comprised of a preface and three chapters: the preface tackles Iraq's political, economic and social conditions concisely, drawing a clear image of old Iraqi society before the events that followed in 1869. Chapter one examines Iraq's main socio-economic developments. Chapter two focuses on the question of modernizing Iraqi society and the main obstacles that hindered the process. Chapter three studies and analyses the internal circumstances and factors, particularly those that emerged following the federalists' revolution and its inflammatory role for various Iraqi segments.

By "modern structure", the book refers to a tangled set of elements and relations of mutual interest, the presence of which forms the material and intellectual basis for the development of society. These elements include modern intellectuals (intelligentsia) and those from modern economic environments (industrial, commercial, and financial). These considerations are

clear in the events between 1869 (the inauguration of the Suez Canal and the accelerating expansion of foreign trade, which led to economic shifts and social fractures in Iraqi society) and 1908 (the federalist revolution that pushed for attempts to translate Iraqi social aspirations into reality).

The author believes that domestic factors in Iraqi society had the biggest impact on the formation of modern Iraqi thought, particularly political thought, given its direct and vital relation to society's structural loyalties. Thus, the conclusion on the nature of prevalent ideas and political notions was largely related to the concordance between influential Iraqi segments (owners of agricultural lands) and emerging Iraqi segments (merchants, intellectuals, and intelligentsia), as well as to the level of results achieved by the intelligentsia in their conflict with the traditional intellectual system of Iraqi society.

A Depiction of Socio-Economic Developments in Iraq 1869 - 1914

The author begins his book with an introduction (p13-25) in which he briefly touches upon the authoritarian elite and the composition of Iraqi society between 1831 and 1869, beginning with the fall of the Mamluks (1750-1831) in Iraq and the return of the direct Ottoman hegemony until the inauguration of the Suez Canal.

In chapter one, "the socio-economic structure of Iraq 1869-1914" (p27-80), the author tackles the relevant socio-economic developments, namely the expansion of foreign trade, which capitalized Iraq's traditional production relations and their economic structures (Bedouin, rural, and urban), as well as the social implications on segments of Iraqi society. The author

observes the nature of Iraq's historical process since 1869 and the influence of the inauguration of the Suez Canal as the shortest waterway between Atlantic and Pacific ports, shortening the distance between them by 8,000-15,000 km in comparison with the previous route around Africa. This also reduced the time required to travel from and into Europe by nearly half or two thirds, as well as a sharp decline in shipping costs. The cost of shipping from Izmir to London during the period between 1835 and 1876, for example, was cut by half. In some cases, the cost decline continued until 1914. This period signalled the introduction of capitalism into a primitive Iraqi environment that could be described as pre-capitalist, at best, and the resulting internal conflict among the existing social powers and their interests, as well as the submission of this environment to the new capitalist powers. This historical process played its role through two channels: the first was the fall of Iraq's agricultural surplus under the control of the global capital through the commercial capital. The second was encouraging the forces of change within this agro-commercial environment by creating the logical circumstances for the emergence and development of a market-oriented private property relation, thus laying the foundation for this capitalist production with a local feature.

This complex historical process in Ottoman Iraq was most evident when the fundamental contradiction governing the disposition of land was exposed, which led to a conflict resulting in the deterioration of the chieftdom and the traditional production patterns represented by tribal feudalism, as well as the emergence of new production relations based on private property, led by former chiefs and absent owners ranging between the wealthy, the merchants, and the clergy.

The author reaches important conclusions, namely that the constant expansion of foreign trade at the expense of local industries, as well as harnessing agriculture for this purpose, led to compradors and owners taking control over craftsmen and farmers.

Thus, this change came in favour of one segment over the other.

For most craftsmen and producers, the continuous influx of foreign merchandise into local markets signalled a steady decline from owning their own shops and workshops to working as skilled labour. Thousands of people worked for institutions that adapted to or benefited from the new capitalist system. Those workers formed the seed of Iraq's working class.

Just as there was a convergence and interconnection between compradors and landowners, in terms of marketing agricultural produce, there was also competition between property owners and merchants on the one hand and chiefs and tribal leaders (old feudalists) on the other hand. These competed over agricultural land, which explains – among other things – how lands kept and increased their value.

The increasing demand for agricultural produce justified how land became a popular commodity to be invested in commercially. As much as this new agro-commercial system provided a comfortable situation for those who benefited from it, it also robbed tribesmen of their right to ownership guaranteed by tribal norms that receded in favour of commercial feudalism.

The expansion of foreign trade thus reshaped segments of Iraqi society according to the new distribution of economic power. It also produced the new segment of compradors, leading thousands of workers to form the seed of the working class. It turned land ownership (the main method of production) into a new decisive criterion for the emergence of the remaining segments, including absent owners (city residents or chiefs) and peasant leaders, both of whom joined the indigents; the peasants who lost their lands to the exploitation of their labour to meet the capitalist market needs. As a result, economic power became limited to new beneficiary segments. Foreign trade, one can thus conclude, put Iraqi society on the road to class pluralism, the pace of which depended on the level of contradiction caused by this expansion.

The Modernization of Iraqi Society under Ottoman Rule

Chapter two (p80-144) examines the modernization of Iraqi society under Ottoman rule, tracking reforms in the Ottoman empire and their impact on

the modernization process and the obstacles facing it, whether through internal or external influence. This comes in an attempt by the author to identify

where responsibility lay in determining the fate of such process, as well as to examine the value of the achievements made by Iraqi intelligentsia in favour of modernization, which can be defined as the sum of operations targeting economic, social, political, cultural and ideological changes. In other words, the sum of changes aiming to exit a limited and traditional local society. This is because the traditional values of any social system normally pose an obstacle before the development of underdeveloped societies, which makes it necessary to give them up in favour of modernization values that should be adopted both theoretically and in practice, to be able to deal with and adapt to new changes caused by opening up to the outside world.

Reform attempts by Iraq's intelligentsia to bring their society up to date with their contemporary standards failed due to the limited impact of government modernization. Social gains, which were closely connected to the external economic factor, were not sufficient to put the terms for such revolutionary change. Adapting Iraqis to economic needs went somewhat faster than catering to their social needs. Thus, selectivity deprived this modernization from the part that was most able to serve the process compared to others. Perhaps the modernization of Iraqi society could have been facilitated by other

means were it not for the recession of the industrial segment, a loose part of the Iraqi bourgeoisie. In other words, the main factors hindering the modernization of Iraqi society were as follows: the inefficiency of the government's reform policy as the modernization process was politicized, as well as its failure to reconcile its main goal with its desire to give the private sector the opportunity to expand, which led to Iraqi capital flight abroad, further complicated by the government's continuous draining of the Iraqi governorates' resources; the shortage of industrial capital, which hindered the industrial segment's initiatives to invest its expertise in capitalist projects and the external economic factor that tamed the bourgeoisie to serve its interests, becoming a part of its production and consumption mechanisms.

In summary, the development of the social components' economic disparity devoid of a modern base of industrial or intellectual production means that most of these components retained their backwards tribal sociological composition, a contradiction leading to social disruption or imbalance that in turn hindered the modernization process. This would explain some of the reasons of why the modernization of Iraqi states was clearer in form than it was in content.

The Impact of the Socio-Economic Structure on Modern Iraqi Political Thought 1908 - 1914

Chapter three, "the impact of the socio-economic structure on modern Iraqi political thought 1908-1914" (p145-205), closely examines internal circumstances and factors – particularly following the federalist revolution – and the role these played in inciting the various Iraqi segments, as well as their impact on the emergence of modern Iraqi political thought as it related to the preferred form of governance, the principle of social justice, and other notions relating to the idea of liberty.

The most important points to conclude in this regard are as follows:

- The Ottoman power's failure to provide a collective identity, which fuelled local polarization and promoted the principle of social sovereignty (urban or tribal) at the expense of national sovereignty.
- In promoting their ideas and reform attempts, Iraqi intellectuals relied on two methods: the first was to strengthen ties and work with decision makers, and the second was to become an ally with the conservative segment with its social status and political wealth.
- By a simple comparison of the three governorates (Baghdad, Basra, Mosul), we can conclude that Basra was the most successful in offering what can be described as identity, albeit primitive, but what guaranteed its continuance was the material foundation based on semi-capitalist relations and class settlements.

All the above undoubtedly reflects how modern Iraqi political thought was influenced by the changes to the socio-economic structure in the late Ottoman era, particularly with the eruption of the federalist revolution in 1908. And although the revolution only allowed the conciliatory intellectual trend to dominate, this in itself was a paradigm shift in favour of the development of Iraqi political thought necessary for the formation of modern Iraqi society.

The author concludes his book by emphasizing that the deep changes that took place in Iraqi society during the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, until the beginning of World War I (1914-1918), were the outcome of socio-economic variables resulting mainly from the external economic factor, leading to a gradual shift of balance in social relations, most evident in the emergence of new social segments. However, at the same time, this social mobility allowed the old exploited structures to remain. Iraqi governorates did not witness revolutions based on the demands of the deprived social classes that affect the privileges of the influential segment, because the latter was able to renew itself. This is most evident in the emergence of commercial feudalism, which is in effect a median state resulting from an adaptive process to the outcomes of the external economic factor. This renewal facilitated the links that quickly connected landowners with the elements of the commercial and financial environments.

The segments acquiring a high financial and moral status in Iraqi society were grateful for the status quo, thus fearing change rather than aspiring to it. They were concerned with the social and intellectual variables that followed the federalist revolution, which made them reach out to elements from the intellectuals-intelligentsia segment that failed to tame Iraqi public opinion.

Peasants and workers were left with a lost sense of security due to poverty and constant destitution, as well as the loss of confidence in the outside world. Defending their collective interests overpowered the larger intellectual and economic concerns. This intertwined with the intelligentsia being disappointed

with the outcomes of the modernization process. Thus, the conservative powers managed to polarize and include many of them, virtually weakening the remaining voices. The intellectuals also deviated from their calling, or at least had their intellectual ambitions reduced, particularly those who preferred this solution to marginalization.

Given the limited and rather terminated conflict of interests between two classes, each of which sought to achieve more gains in the framework of the existing social structure without even proposing a change, it was only natural for a conciliatory trend to dominate intellectual ideas.

Thus, to achieve the best possible level of social democracy, intellectuals preferred to call for social solidarity rather than the radical idea of socialist ownership. There was a near consensus among the Iraqi elite (both traditional and modern) on the call for “administrative decentralization”, which proved to consider the structural interests of the influential segments who only understood the concept of liberty in its general and limited term and adopted the social hierarchy, ignoring the more advanced Western liberalism and deeming it an unaffordable price. Moreover, economic liberalism proved to be more present in intellectual ideas than other meanings of liberty. This would not have happened were it not for this economic liberalism concept – unlike other notions of liberty – protecting the privileges of influential segments and expressing the aspirations of emerging commercial elites. We thus come to understand why the Basra Reform Association was the only entity urging the Ottoman government to appoint an Iraqi ruler. It became clear that the emergence of double standards in Iraqi society pushed political intellectual ideas towards a general paradox.

In conclusion, the emergence of the abovementioned concepts in their final forms – the main basis of modern Iraqi political thought – was the result of socio-economic changes within Iraqi society that can be clearly detected from the beginning of national rule in Iraq from 1921– 1958.