

# The Sectarian Imagining of the 1920 Revolution and the Construction of a Shi'i Victimization Narrative<sup>(1)</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that the sectarian definition of the 1920 "revolution" as a Shi'i event whose "fruits" were "stolen" by non-Shi'is (typically Sunnis) and eventually leading to the ongoing marginalization of Iraq's Shia as a group, is a narrative that represents a much-publicized ideological construction that gained momentum with the rise of Iraqi Shi'i Islamism following the triumph of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the consequent establishment of the Islamic government in Iran with Ayatollah Khomeini as its spiritual and official leader. This paper also finds that the modern narrative of Shia-targeting also fits well with the traditional Shia historical definition of self, which considers the faith and its adherents as targets for powerful proto-Sunni, and later Sunni, forces.

Sunni

Shia

Iraq

1920 Revolution

Victimhood

## Introduction

Over the decades, the 1920 "revolution" has undergone a continuous process of being defined and redefined, mostly in the interest of winning the ideological battles of the day by claiming ownership of this revolution in search of national/patriotic legitimacy for a variety of political movements.<sup>(3)</sup> The sectarian definition of the revolution as a Shi'i event whose "fruits" were "stolen" by non-Shi'is (typically Sunnis) and eventually leading to the ongoing marginalization of Iraq's Shia as a group, is one ideological investment that is still dominant with us today.<sup>(4)</sup> This paper argues that this particular narrative represents a much-publicized ideological

construction that gained momentum with the rise of Iraqi Shi'i Islamism following the triumph of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the consequent establishment of the Islamic government in Iran with Ayatollah Khomeini as its spiritual and official leader.

The effect of the Iranian revolution was to embolden, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a latent activist form of Shia Islamism in Iraq. The brutal suppression of this Shi'i Islamist movement by Saddam Hussain's Ba'athist regime lent credence to this simplistic Sunni versus Shi'i dichotomy upon which this marginalization narrative rests. So many Shi'is died or were exiled at the hands of the "governing Sunnis," while Saddam

1 This study was intended to be presented in the 7th Annual Conference for Historical Studies (2020) titled "100 years on from the 1920 Iraq Revolution: Narratives of the Nation State and the Struggle over Memory," which was canceled due to circumstances imposed by the spread of COVID-19. The paper is to be published in a book by ACRPS in 2022.

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3 Calling the events between the end of June and the end of November 1920 as a revolution is an Iraqi consensus that emerged gradually in the years following these events. This designation is another ideological investment informed by the subsequent rise of Iraqi nationalism. This paper follows this consensus, partly to avoid engaging here in the debate about naming these events.

4 The dominance of this narrative has been routinely asserted following the brutal suppression by the Ba'athist regime in 1991 of the armed uprising in the southern and Middle Euphrates provinces, aiming to overthrow this regime. In retrospect, the Shia identity of this uprising has been popularized as its main reference point. This shows in the very act of naming this uprising among Iraqi Shia Islamists and, post-2003, the ruling elite who normally call it the Sha'bāniyya uprising (*al-Intifāda ash-Sha'bāniyya*), using the Islamic calendar. Sha'bān is the eighth Muslim month and, according to Shia belief, witnessed the birth of the twelfth Imam, the Awaited Mahdi, in the middle of this month. Although it is not conclusively known when this uprising began, many people, Islamists included, argue that it began on that day.

Hussein declared war on the Islamic republic of Iran in 1980, supposedly with the support and encouragement of the anti-Shia western and Arab Sunni regimes. It thus seems logical, at a first glance, to consider the whole process—targeting Shias domestically, in Iraq, and abroad, through the Islamic republic of Iran—as an orchestrated regional-international campaign against a self-asserting Shia Islam. This modern narrative of

Shia-targeting also fits well with the traditional Shia historical definition of self. This definition considers the faith and its adherents as targets for powerful proto-Sunni, and later Sunni, forces since the early days of Islam when the first Imam of Shi'ism, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was passed over during the famous succession dispute following the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD.

## First: The First Construction of Modern Shi'i Victimhood

The first detailed documentary evidence of this Shi'i victimhood narrative, however, was not the work of Iraqi Shi'i Islamist, but of an Iraqi pan-Arabist with Shi'i Islamist sympathies at the time, Hasan Al-Alawi, in his book *ash-Shī'a wa ad-Dawla al-Qawamiyya Fī al-'Irāq* (in English: "The Shia and the Pan-Arabist State in Iraq"). Published in the late 1980s, the book represents the first systemic treatment based on Iraq's modern history of the Shi'i victimization narrative. The opening sentence in the introduction to the first print sums up the book's main argument:

*This book discusses the sectarianization of the pan-Arabist state in modern Iraq and the circumstances that led the British administration to formulate the Abdul-Rahman al-Naqib-Cox project. We attribute to this project most of the current problems throughout the past seventy years such as despotism, the policy of sectarian discrimination and the attempts to strip the pan-Arab identity of Iraq's Arab majority [Shia], both of which resulted in defaming the sect of this majority and distorting its history.<sup>(5)</sup>*

In the book, the meeting and agreement of the "two firsts": Percy Cox as the first British High Commissioner in a British-dominated Iraq and Abdul-Rahman al-Naqib, the first Iraqi, and Sunni, prime minister whose government was established in late October 1920, takes on historical significance far more lasting in the life of the Iraqi state than any other event or agreement.

Over the course of roughly 350 pages, the book traces "the details of this sectarianization in the formation of Iraqi ministerial cabinets, membership in the different parliaments, army barracks, the commercial sector and the field of journalism."<sup>(6)</sup> This sectarianization effectively meant the dominance of a Sunni minority over a Shia majority, which, according to the book, always acted in an exemplary spirit of patriotic selflessness in the face of a selfish government.

In the construction of this narrative, the 1920 revolution occupies a central place in the presumed formation of the Sunni-British alliance, i.e., the Naqib-Cox project, that was designed to systematically exclude the Shia from their fair share in state resources and power. Alawi places the beginning of British animosity towards Iraqi Shias at an earlier historical point related to the pro-Ottoman Jihad movement of 1915-1916 against the British invasion which began with the capture of Basra in late 1914. He argues that to the British, the heavy Shia involvement, both as clergyman and clansmen, in this movement served

*as an early field indicator to learn of the main general tendencies of the social forces in Iraq. British policy benefited from it to construct its Iraqi project which bore fruit in the formation of an 'occupation government' whose leadership was entrusted with the leader [Abdul-Rahman al-Naqib] who failed to respond to the call of Jihad issued by his Sheikh in Istanbul.<sup>(7)</sup>*

5 Hassan Alawi, *ash-Shī'a wa ad-Dawla al-Qawamiyya Fī al-'Irāq* (France: CEDI Publications, 1989), p. 7.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 72. The reference here is to the general Jihad call against the Allies issued by the grand mufti of the Ottoman empire on 14 November 1914. Alawi's sentence is meant to question the religious sincerity of the Naqib by failing to answer this call and fight on the side of his Sunni peers, the Ottomans, unlike the Shias who answered their own call of Jihad against the same enemies.

The "general tropes" that Alawi relies on to build his larger argument about victimization are anti-British Shi'ism versus pro-British Sunnism, with some minor exceptions on both sides. In the context of this argument, Alawi considers the 1920 revolution mainly as a nationalist Shi'i act against a non-Muslim foreign occupation that was accepted, if not supported, by pan-Arabist Sunnis (Naqib and Sharifian officers). He calls it the foundational revolution that "followed an Arab emancipatory path"<sup>(8)</sup> that worried the British a lot, convincing them to allow the establishment of the Iraqi state while ensuring that this state would not be led by the revolutionaries themselves, but by Britain's Sunni Iraqi allies:

*If the early years between 1914 and 1920 of the British occupation were the years of the national attack led by the Shias against the British, it seems that since the return of Sir Percy Cox to Iraq in October 1920, the new stage would be the years of the British attack on the nationalist Iraqis, an attack whose theatre of operation was the holy cities and the Middle Euphrates areas. The religious establishment in Najaf [al-Hawza] played the role of the commander in this theatre. It became clear that the British strategy would change after the Iraqi revolution by resorting to what we can call as the antithesis, based on which a local administration led by a Mohammadan, as they used to say it, would be established to function as the counterweight to the national thesis. In this way, the British would remove the problem of having to clash directly with the Iraqi nationalists, with all the potential heavy human casualties and financial costs this clash would incur on the British people exhausted by war.<sup>(9)</sup>*

The British choice for a leader for this local administration, according to Alawi, could not be one of those who rose in arms against the British, mainly the Shia.<sup>(10)</sup> Rather, it had to be an Iraqi British loyalist represented by Naqib himself.

Indeed, the argument that Alawi presents is clear and straightforward, providing an easy organizing framework to understand politics in Iraq throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book became immensely popular, earning its author about £250,000 from its sales in the UK alone.<sup>(11)</sup> It went through many printed editions in Syria, Iran and continental Europe, often without the author's permission or acknowledgment of copyrights. According to the author himself, Shi'i Islamists were enthused with the book because it offered them a secular argument in support of their Islamist cause that they themselves could not make.<sup>(12)</sup> They even made unauthorized copies of the book to help circulate it.<sup>(13)</sup> Beside the straightforward argument, another reason for the popularity of the book was that it broke a well-established taboo in the public sphere in modern Iraq — staying away from discussing sects and sectarianism, let alone interpret the nation's history through the prism of sectarianism, something that was particularly avoided during times of sectarian tensions under the Ba'athist regime. These tensions started in the early 1980s, with the war against a revolutionary Iran asserting its new Islamist Shia identity, and were intensified following the March 1991 uprising when Shi'i rebels were brutally suppressed by the government and Shi'i holy sites were bombed.

Indeed, Alawi communicated feelings that went largely unexpressed among many Iraqi Shia, secular or Islamist, during the 1980s about what they saw as the national victimhood of their group based on faith. Alawi took this sense of victimhood beyond the Ba'athist era to link it to the very genesis of the Iraqi modern state in the 1920s, presenting it as a larger phenomenon across a generational anti-Shia exclusionary scheme perpetuated by Iraqi Sunnis in the name of pan-Arabism. The wide appeal of this argument, for Iraqi Shi'i Islamists in particular, is that it allowed them to fit Alawi's "local" modern political victimization story in 20<sup>th</sup> Iraq into a universal

8 Ibid., p. 114.

9 Ibid., p. 134.

10 Ibid.

11 Interview (through voice messages) with Hassan Alawi on 21 February 2020. By Iraqi standards of book sales, this level of revenue is very exceptional.

12 Ibid.

13 "Shihādāt Khāsa: Liqā' ma' al-Mufakir al-'Irāqī Ḥasan 'Alawī," *al-Falūja TV on Youtube*, 19 March 2017, accessed on 20 February 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2WeCDJR>

and pre-modern victimhood narrative of Shia everywhere since the death of Prophet Mohammed fourteen centuries ago. Based on a traditional Shi'i understanding, this narrative began with the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, being deprived of leading the Caliphate upon the death of the Prophet. In other words, the plight of the Iraqi Shia in modern Iraq is only one chapter in the greater saga of systemic discrimination against the Shia across time and place.

Yet, as a piece of historical scholarship, the book is deeply flawed and highly selective, reducing Iraq's complex modern history to a simple binary opposition between Shi'is and Sunnis that presents each group as a homogenous mass of people who think and act generally alike. Important socio-economic, geographical, and individual differences in each group disappear in the interest of this coerced homogeneity. It is in this homogenized context that the Shia become British-opposing Iraqi nationalists while Sunnis turn out to be Shia-denigrating pan-Arabists and pro-British allies. The few exceptions that Alawi makes here and there on both sides are not sufficient to invalidate or undermine the problematic generalization that he established. Crucial contextual issues are regularly ignored in order to help consolidate an assumed consistency within each group. For instance, both Sunnis and Shi'is, based on their class interests, dealt with and benefitted from the British. Before 1920, many of what Alawi calls British-opposing Shi'i nationalists, who became the leading figures in the 1920 revolution, were on good terms with the British, collaborating with them and often the happy recipients of their influence, largess and tax exemptions.<sup>(14)</sup> The real conflict was not merely

of ideas and feelings; i.e., between Iraqi nationalism championed by the Shia and British colonialism aided by ambitious Sunnis, as Alawi portrays, but of socio-economic interests, among other things, that were threatened. This is in addition, of course, to the colonial misconduct of some British political officers in the Middle Euphrates areas and the rise of Iraqi nationalism in the urban centers. Exploring the variety of causes for the revolution, religious, political, and economic, Yitzhak Nakash explains the economic motivations of the Shi'i clergymen and local Sayyids, both of whom played a leading role in the revolution:

*British presence in Iraq increased the fear of the mujtahids as well as that of the sayyids. From an early stage of the occupation, the British sought to regulate the flow of Iranian charities as well as the pilgrimage and the corpse traffic to the shrine cities. Were the British to succeed in controlling these sources of income, the mujtahids stood to lose much of their independence and influence among the local population. The British occupation also posed a grave challenge to the status of the sayyids who resided among the Shi'i tribes, and whose income was derived largely from the contributions of tribesmen. British administrative skills and organizational power, which were greater than those of the sayyids, threatened to erode the latter's image and influence among the tribesmen . . . The Arab sayyids and the Persian mujtahids thus had a common interest in inciting the tribes to revolt so as to preserve their own eminent position among their Shi'i constituency in Iraq.<sup>(15)</sup>*

14 In a British government report, dealing with British efforts in Iraq from the control of Basra in 1915 until the summer of 1920 prior to breakout of the 1920 revolution, a brief description of the early cooperation between the British and tribal Sheiks shortly after the British capture of Baghdad in March 1917: "The chief problem of the Euphrates was, not the tribes, but the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. The town shaiks, as has been mentioned, returned from their visit to Baghdad with a mandate to carry on temporarily on our behalf the administration, if it can be dignified by that name, which they had set up after the final ejection of the Turks in 1917; for this service they were assigned allowances. Short of the appointment of a British officer with an adequate personal guard, a course which on military grounds was feasible, this was the only practical alternative; but it was obviously merely a stop-gap." Arnold Talbot Wilson & Gertrude Lowthian Bell, *Review of Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1920), p. 35. Muhsin Abu Tabikh, a prominent Sheikh in the Middle Euphrates and a leading figure in the 1920 revolution, writes that "No sooner had the British military occupied the homeland than they inundated us with favors from all directions. In addition to the boons and monetary gifts they granted, they more than doubled their efforts in the way of agricultural and infrastructural projects such as digging streams and building barrages and the like. It seemed that they thought that these were not sufficient to win our hearts and minds, so they became very lenient towards farmers in that they did not collect from us taxes on the produce of the agricultural lands beyond five percent [the normal tax rate is about thirty percent]. And after they got this percentage, they returned a fifth of it to Sheikh as a gift." See: Muhsin Abu Tabikh, *Mudhakarāt as-Sayyid Muhsin 'abu Tabikh, 1910-1960: Khamsoon 'Āman min Tārīkh al-'Irāq as-Siyāsī al-Hadīth*, Jamil Abu Tabikh (ed.) (Beirut: al-Mu'asasa al-'Arabiyya lil Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr, 2001), p. 70.

15 Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 66.

Other sources, Iraqi and Western, detailed many aspects in the revolution that simply refute the simplistic Shia-Sunni binary opposition argument in Alawi's book. Such aspects include, to cite only few, why the "Shi'i" South, particularly Basra, remained largely silent during the revolution while "Sunni" Anbar and Diyala participated, fighting the British and how the Shi'i Middle Euphrates tribal leaders of the revolution later entered in a structurally deep and long-term alliance with the ruling Sunni elite in Baghdad throughout the decades of the monarchy.<sup>(16)</sup> Indeed, any serious historical examination of the events can easily reveal that Abdul-Rahman Al-Naqib's role in the formation of the politics of the new emerging Iraqi state is greatly exaggerated in Alawi's book to help construct the victimization narrative where Naqib is painted as the primary Iraqi

partner in initiating this narrative through the sectarian institutional realities that he supposedly helped author and consolidate. Mainly taking advantage of the man's generally condescending view of Shi'is, unlike King Faisal's sympathetic embrace of them, Alawi's book turns Naqib's relatively minor transitional role in the events then to a major and decisive one that has left an indelible mark on the successive ruling arrangements in modern Iraq.

Despite the book's poor scholarship, one overarching consequence that flowed from its argument among many Iraqi Shi'is, particularly Islamists, has been to frame the 1920 revolution as the point of departure for Shi'i marginalization in modern Iraq that would continue and solidify through the decades to come until the US overthrew Saddam's government in 2003, the last Sunni regime in Iraq, to usher in Shi'i rule.

## Second: The "Manifesto of the Shia of the Iraq" and the Promotion of the Victimization Narrative

Alawi's book was so influential that its primary argument about the modern victimhood of the Iraqi Shia found its way into many books and articles throughout and after the 1990s. The book also influenced political thinking within the Iraqi opposition to Saddam's regime. One example of the reach of Alawi's argument is its appearance in a famous political manifesto called *'I'lān Shī'at al-'Irāq* (in English: "Manifesto of the Shia of the Iraq") which came out in early 2002, signed by scores of Shi'i activists and opposition figures, both Islamist and liberal. Born out of two-year discussions among the signatories and others, the manifesto positions

itself as a response to the Iraqi state's discriminatory practices:

*This manifesto attempts to deal with the politics of sectarian discrimination in Iraq. This topic is so sensitive that it requires accurate treatment, an objective and neutral look, and a pragmatic scientific vision, because the manifesto's aim is to build a new Iraq where all live freely and equally and the Shias, who represent the majority of the Iraqi people, enjoy their civil and constitutional rights which were intentionally taken away from them by the ruling authorities since the formation of the modern Iraqi state.<sup>(17)</sup>*

16 One example that the complexity of the socio-political map of alliances and animosities defies the simplistic dualism of Sunnis and Shias is what Hana Batatu mentions: "As noteworthy is the apparent direct correlation between political quiescence and big sheikhdoms: with few exceptions, the big landed shaikhs and begs or, to be more historically accurate, the shaikhs and begs that became big landowners under the monarchy, had provided a shaikhly anchor for British policy during and after the years of the British occupation, taking no part in the Iraqi uprising of 1920 or in the subsequent movement against the 'Mandate.' They also had no share in the tribal rebellions of 1935-1937. This is in marked contrast to the majority of the smaller shaikhs of the Hindiyyah and Shāmiyyah Branches of the Middle Euphrates and of the lower reaches of this river, who formed the backbone of the anti-British movement of the risings of the thirties. However, some of the shaikhs of the Ḥilla Shaḥḥ who would later become large landlords participated in the 1920 events but, as the then British civil commissioner brought out, they mostly followed their tribesmen rather than led them." Batatu then adds another reason: "The explanation for the fact just mentioned is to be sought in yet another element that differentiated among tribal chiefs: The powerful influence that the Shī'ī *'ulamā'* exercised, particularly in the twenties, over the rank-and-file tribesmen of the middle and lower Euphrates, which made it difficult for the shaikhs of these regions—irrespective of their status—to ignore clerical injunctions. The shaikhs of other Arab areas, including Shī'ī shaikhs of the Tigris and the Gharrāf, were far less susceptible to pressures from the religious class." Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 82.

17 "'I'lān Shī'at al-'Irāq," *AlJazeera*, 3 October 2004, accessed on 15 February 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2WlxAAr>

The manifesto's call for equal citizenship as the solution for Iraq's political problems assumes that sect-based inequality was the true source of these problems, hence solving the sectarian problem would lead to solving other problems flowing from it:

*The oppression of the Shia by the ruling authority became a dominant practice in Iraq's political life, leading to many crises and complications that plunged Iraq in dictatorship, causing the disappearance of all facets of democracy and freedom. Due to this, Iraq's overcoming of its political crises and the building of its political future cannot be realized without resolving the sectarian problem by not allowing this problem to inform the next ruling regime and by acting in a fully national way in designing the new political system, away from sectarian percentages and classification.*<sup>(18)</sup>

The manifesto's attribution of the emergence in modern Iraq of political despotism in the form of dictatorship to the establishment of "Sunni minority" rule over the "Shi'i majority" echoes another point made by Alawi. The latter considered the appearance of this dictatorship as an inevitable result of the sectarian governing arrangements following the 1920 revolution. When discussing what he calls "the six unchangeable principles" that "constitute the ideology of the pan-Arab ruling authority,"<sup>(19)</sup> Alwai links dictatorship to minority rule in a harmful symbiotic relationship:

*Since power was entrusted with the minority and since the politics of this power was in favour of being structurally linked with Western strategy, and British interests in particular, it was inevitable that there would be reactions. This meant that the government had to resort to a strict regime of despotism and continuous oppression against opposing opinion and free expression.*<sup>(20)</sup>

This understanding of the root causes of despotism and the absence of democracy, in both the book

and the manifesto, reinforces the essentialist binary interpretation of Iraq's modern history and society. It also runs contrary to the dominant and widely accepted approaches in the field of political science about the pivotal role the mainstream culture, as manifested in common social and political practice, plays in the emergence of democracy and despotism.<sup>(21)</sup>

Yet, the manifesto, unlike the book, was primarily about influencing the direction of present-day politics, not the interpretation of history. It is a political statement, not a piece of scholarship. At the time of its publication in 2002, the manifesto, correctly anticipating the US intention to overthrow Saddam's regime, represents a future plan of action — it does not wallow in the sorrows caused by the assumed sectarian oppressions of the past. But this futuristic spirit is so much informed by the fears of the past and the wish not to repeat the errors that gave rise to these fears in the first place. The fact that many liberal and secular Shi'is living in the West, including communists, signed the manifesto says a lot about the widespread appeal of this sectarian interpretation of Iraq's history.

Like Alawi's thesis in his book or even inspired by it, the manifesto, by taking for granted the victimization narrative of Iraqi Shias and the consequent emergence of dictatorship, traces the founding moment in the construction of this victimization and the dictatorship supposedly maintaining this victimization, to the 1920 revolution, the "distorted" result of which turns out to be the source of all Iraq's ills in general, and the suffering of Shias in particular:

*The British occupation faced a strong social solidarity between the Sunnis and the Shias as the Iraqis were united in their rejection of the occupation and in their insistence on forming a national independent government. This social solidarity found its oppositional political expression in rejecting the projects and proposals presented by the occupation administration. The united nationalist wave*

18 Ibid.

19 Alawi, p. 151.

20 Ibid., pp. 151-152.

21 It is almost an article of faith, for instance, in many democracy studies to acknowledge how the rise of a strong middle class, with its generally liberal values, is important to building a democracy. In the manifesto and Alawi's book, the sect, as a primordial formation, replaces class, as a dynamic force.

*intensified to express its opposition through the immortal 1920 revolution which was led by Shia Ulama and men. This revolution made Britain form an Iraqi government on a sectarian basis to break Iraq's social unity and give priority to the interest of one sect over the national interest. This sectarian policy became the method which successive Iraqi governments followed.*<sup>(22)</sup>

It is interesting that the manifesto, probably because of another echo from the book, reserves a special mention for Abdul-Rahman Al-Naqib for his allegedly central role in constructing the minority rule and the Shi'i victimization that flowed from it. Indeed, a careful examination of the manifesto can easily demonstrate that its historical and political ideas, as well as its roadmap for a future democratic Iraq free from political sectarianism, owe a great debt to Alawi's book. Alawi himself is one signatory of the manifesto and his book is listed in it as one recommended reading about the Iraqi Shia.

In both the book and the manifesto, the 1920 revolution is portrayed as a founding, yet dividing, event around which there is much idealization. It is founding in

the sense that it becomes both the launchpad and the proving ground of Iraqi nationalism, bringing all Iraqis together, albeit unequally, in the defense of Iraq's independence and future statehood. It is also dividing in the sense that the revolution represents a clarifying, but painful, moment of truth about the tension between the feelings of "Sunni" conditional loyalty and those of "Shi'i" unconditional loyalty to the general welfare of Iraq as a whole. In the confrontation with the British, Iraqi Shias emerges as the spearheading group and the rank-and-file of the revolutionary fighting force, bearing the brunt of the foreign enemy's anger during the revolution itself. They eventually pay a heavy price for their brave nationalistic spirit by being excluded from meaningful, or proportional, access to institutional power when the new Iraqi state is established as a consequence of the revolution. In this narrative of the revolution, Iraqi Sunnis are presented as conveniently nationalist who are not ready, unlike the Shia, to persist and sacrifice for their belief in nationalism, becoming, at the end, the pragmatic opportunists who accept a "tainted deal" with the British at the expense of their fellow countrymen, the Shia.

### Third: Reclaiming Iraq and the Academic Narrativization of Shia Victimhood

Unlike Alawi's book, which is historical, and the manifesto, which is political, Abbas Kadhim's book, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*, puts the argument about the Shi'i victimization narrative in academic terms. More focused than the other two texts on the revolution and its importance, the book gives the revolution an almost trans-historical meaning by explaining his choice of the title of the book itself: "The title *Reclaiming Iraq* refers to the main goal of

the revolution: to reclaim Iraq from six and a half centuries of uninterrupted foreign rule (1258–1920)."<sup>(23)</sup> It is, indeed, hard to square this very grand claim with another, historically accurate, claim that the author presents in the preceding page that this "book contends that the 1920 Revolution was essentially an uprising carried out by tribal forces."<sup>(24)</sup> It seems illogical to argue that the generally uneducated, mostly illiterate, tribal people in Iraq's Middle Euphrates region of 1920 had this special sort of deep national awareness

22 "'I'lān Shī'at al-'Irāq."

23 Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), p. 7. In the concluding chapter of the book, the author makes what seems a contradictory paragraph by acknowledging other factors, other than nationalism: "But the economic and nationalist factors were not all that triggered the 1920 Revolution. Any effort to explain the revolution as a direct result of heavy-handed policies or excessive taxation or even nationalist aspirations can be only partially true. Furthermore, these claims are problematic because they are often made for the purpose of dismissing the Iraqi Revolution by insinuating that resistance to the British occupation was merely a matter of self-interest on the part of the tribes. This explanation is often coupled with the playing down of any nationalist awareness in the Middle Euphrates, as if nationalism were the only legitimate cause for revolution, not to mention the elitism involved in asserting that nationalism was a monopoly of the urban professionals." Kadhim, p. 162.

24 Ibid., p. 6.

of history, mobilizing them to rise in arms against the most powerful modern empire. In addition to the clearly unhistorical nature of this claim, the very fact it was made ignores the basic and overwhelming evidence that the revolution was primarily motivated by local and immediate grievances which have been well-documented in many sources.<sup>(25)</sup> The idea of foreignness in invoking the ending of more than six centuries of "foreign rule" as the goal for the revolution is also very problematic as it implies a well-defined sense of national identity among the tribes that transcends, if not wholly overrules, religious identity. It renders the Muslim Ottomans, masters of Iraq for four centuries, on whose side these tribes had fought against the British a few years earlier (the Jihad movement 1915-1916) become foreign. The historical evidence is strong that the binary division of "us" as Iraqis versus "them" as foreign (basically non-Arab foreigners) developed later after the revolution; that is, gradually and over relatively a long period of time. The rise of pan-Arabism in the 1930s onward played a significant role in promoting and mainstreaming this division.

The book's main argument about the revolution itself is evidently tribe-leaning, giving priority to the actual military battlefield of the revolution over its downfall and its meaning as a national movement grounded first and foremost in early urban awareness of Iraqi nationalism. Despite the book's rather brief acknowledgement of the urban influence on the tribal areas in this regard, its true emphasis is on the tribal dimension that seems to subsume the revolution for the author. The urban-tribal divide in approaching the revolution is defining of the book, let alone of understanding the events of the revolution:

*The British did not feel any true security threats at all in Baghdad, Basra, or Hilla. The cities of Karbala, Najaf, Kufa, and Diwaniya, which ultimately became part of the*

*revolution, did not take part in it because their residents decided to take up arms against the British; instead they were besieged, attacked, and finally captured by the tribes after the British unilaterally decided to evacuate their positions. Those cities where the tribal attacks were not successful, such as Hilla, remained under British control. Similarly, when the tribes were being subjected to overwhelming British bombardment, the cities were the first to surrender and to accept all the British conditions, while the tribes remained fighting until the end of the revolution. As soon as the tribes lost the city of Twairij—between Hilla and Karbala—on 12 October 1920, notables in Karbala, led by Shaykh Fakhri Kammuna, began to form a committee to negotiate a surrender with the British. The city opened its gates a week later. The same happened to Najaf after the capture of Kufa. The British captured Kufa on 17 October 1920, and Najaf surrendered the next day. The early collapse of the cities was a reminder of the lessons learned earlier from the Najaf revolution of 1918: no effective revolution could happen, or persist, without the support and active participation of the tribes.<sup>(26)</sup>*

It is clear that the book only considers fighting as part of the revolution.<sup>(27)</sup> There are reasons why the countryside shouldered the burden of fighting, such as the fact the disproportionate amount of British heavy handedness, including forced labour and strict taxation<sup>(28)</sup> that it received. The topographical nature of tribal land also allows better movement for fighting and manoeuvring and the availability of weapons among the tribes was part of a lifestyle which often involved fighting to settle differences. It is difficult to count out the revolution of important non-combatants such as the many notables and lower-rank clergy in the Middle Euphrates who did a lot of preaching to

25 The very nationalistic nature of the revolution is itself an act of construction that developed gradually in the years and decades after the revolution. There is no doubt that agitators and supporters, particularly in Baghdad and the Middle Euphrates urban centers such as Najaf and Karbala as well as many leading figures in the revolution had nationalistic beliefs as important motives, but the majority of the low-rank fighters did not.

26 Kadhim, p. 6.

27 The book is rather contradictory in this regard. For instance, it mentions the following in a later section: "The competition for credit among the various Iraqi factions led to distortions about what had taken place in 1920. On the one hand, the combatants saw the revolution only as a period of fighting against the British. Hence, they did not consider those who had not taken part in the fighting to be contributors to, or participants in, the revolution." *Ibid.*, p. 166.

28 Alymer Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia, 1920* (London: W. Blackwood and sons., 1922), pp. 29-33.



motivate people to fight, a fact acknowledged by the book. Also included in this category are the many middle-class nationalists in Baghdad such Jaafar Abu Al-Taman, Naji al-Sweidi, and Ali Al-Bazrgan, as well as others who were involved in the various non-violent aspects of the revolution, some of whom lost their lives because of their active support for it, such as Abdul Majid Kanna who was executed by the British in Baghdad in September 1920.

Yet, the insistence on the tribal nature of the revolution appears designed to give a very specific regional definition of the revolution that makes it a wholly Middle Euphrates event, both in terms of the revolution's less significant urban "intellectual" dimension, i.e., nationalism, and the more significant dimension of tribal fighting. The book comes to view the revolution through this division of labour. This is why the book seeks to minimize as much as possible the nationalist role of Baghdad in mobilizing to confront the British, a well-documented event that was fundamental in facilitating the revolution:

*The emphasis on Baghdad's professionals unjustifiably deprives the professionals of the Middle Euphrates of much-deserved credit. Najaf in particular, as well as Karbala, had constituted a cultural and religious centre of knowledge for more than a thousand years. The prevalence of the city's religious aspect often diverts attention from the fact that it was one of the most important cities in literature and other intellectual activities. If it was not intellectually superior to Baghdad in 1920, Najaf was certainly not inferior. More relevant to the intellectual framework of the 1920 Revolution than the Baghdadis were Najaf thinkers such as the Shabībi brothers, the Kamāl al- Dīn family, the Ṣāfi family, the Jawāhiri family, and other educated figures from the Middle Euphrates such as Sayyid Hādi Zwain, 'Abd al- Ḥamīd Zāhid, and many others. In his memoir of the time immediately before the revolution, Muḥammad Ali Kamāl al- Dīn, a Najafī intellectual and political*

*leader, lists the names of sixty prominent intellectuals from the Middle Euphrates who took part in disseminating the ideas of the nationalist movement. "Their main goal, he wrote, was to explain to their community the idea of the freedom those peoples who were detached from the Ottoman Empire to choose the type of political regime and the government they desire."<sup>(29)</sup>*

Despite this odd, mostly irrelevant, comparison between the intellectuality of cities, the geographical confinement of the nationalist influence on the fighting rebels and their leaders to the cities of the Middle Euphrates, although contradicting historical evidence, is meant to impress on the reader the exclusive Middle Euphrates identity of the revolution.<sup>(30)</sup> But geography, in this particular aspect, has a specific sectarian implication. The Middle Euphrates here stands for the Shia who end up being the losers:

*When the revolution ended and, consequently, the framework of a national government was being contemplated, the bases of alliances shifted from mainly economic and ideological grounds to sectarian ones. The Shi'i allies of yesteryear were cast aside by the emerging Sunni political elite, merely because the Shi'i fell on the other side of the sectarian line of division. The British institutionalized this political exclusion, in keeping with their often-expressed anti- Shi'i sentiment. And in the aftermath of the revolution, its fervent supporters retained nothing but their wounds while its cynical detractors collected the spoils.<sup>(31)</sup>*

Like Alawi and the manifesto, Khadim takes for granted Sunnis and Shi'is as essentialist and undifferentiated categories to be dealt with as reliable units of analysis, each of which, as a group, acts in a homogeneous way based on a fixed sense of identity.

Again, like Alawi's book and the manifesto, *Reclaiming Iraq* repeats the same assertion that the supposedly deliberate mishandling of the outcome of the revolution through a British-Sunni alliance

29 Kadhim, p. 163.

30 Despite the book's acknowledgment that some non-Middle Euphrates regions also rose in arms against the British during the revolution, it explains this movement as based on self-interest and other non-nationalist reasons compared to the reasons of the Middle Euphrates. See: *Ibid.*, Chapter 3, pp. 69-96.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

against the Shia is the cause of violent despotism in Iraq: "The root problem of the modern Iraqi state was, obviously, British-imposed rule of a Sunni minority on the Shi'i majority—a political formula sustained over the decades by oppression and periodic violence."<sup>(32)</sup> Within this larger explanation of Iraq's decades-long problem, King Faisal's constitutional monarchy is painted as the bulwark against the emergence of a democratic experience in Iraq: "To ensure the triumph of Fayṣal and his officers, the British manipulated the elections, supported the deportation of the Shi'i Ayatollahs who opposed the political process and, worst of all, established minority rule in Iraq, putting to rest any hopes for establishing a free and democratic society in the country for the next eight decades."<sup>(33)</sup> In this type of assertion exists the problematic assumption that a sectarian majority rule would automatically ensure a democratic and free society despite the fact that the tribal leaders of the Middle Euphrates area, which the book presents as the Shi'i vanguards of Iraqi nationalism, were themselves very socially conservative and anti-democratic as feudal landlords who officially, with the British and Iraqi government's support and approval, ruled the vast countryside areas according to a harsh and pre-modern tribal code of laws.

The book also presents a running dichotomy between Middle Euphrates leaders who represent Iraqi Shi'i nationalists, standing for their principled nationalism and accepting stoically, without regret, the sufferings ensuing from their heroic adherence to principles on the one hand, and Sunni nationalists whose urban

nationalism is presented as devoid of principle, mainly motivated by self-interest:

*Restricting nationalist awareness to the cities of Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra is not supported by the evidence. Most of the so-called nationalists in these urban centres had changed their colours and allegiances so many times that a chameleon would appear modest in comparison. They were in the service of the Ottoman administration before losing their employment and prestige to the army of foreign professionals who came from Great Britain, India, and Egypt in 1918.*<sup>(34)</sup>

The book appears to establish the binary of treacherous "foreign agents" in approaching these Sunni nationalists who conveniently allied themselves with the colonizing British in contrast to the "Iraqi patriots," who steadfastly resisted this colonizing power, mostly reserved for the Shi'i nationalists of the Middle Euphrates. Both terms, and their many derivatives and euphemisms, figure out prominently in the mainstream register of Iraqi nationalism, arousing anger towards the "traitors" and of admiration for the "patriots." Nonetheless, in serious academic circles, such terms and what they stand for carry little value and can hardly be the basis of any meaningful and solid historical scholarship. Their use in the mainstream culture of Iraq has always been associated with some form of ideological sloganeering that ignores context, simplifies the complexity of events, and replaces causality with morality.

#### Fourth: The Flaws in the Victimization Narrative

Two points are worth noting in the three documents examined so far in this study. The first is the thorough demonization of the British, not only as a colonial power, but also as an anti-Shi'i and anti-Iraqi nationalism force. It is common in both the official and mainstream registers of Iraqi history to view the British with hostility and to consider every move

they made as an attempt to undermine Iraq or take something away from it. Indeed, Iraqi nationalism was born as a reaction to the British hegemony and misconduct in Iraq, particularly the failure to set up a free national government to allow Iraqis to run their affairs as was promised early on by the British colonial authorities. But to sum up the British

32 Ibid., p. 170.

33 Ibid., p. 147.

34 Ibid., p. 172.

role in Iraq in this simplistic way runs contrary to historical evidence. Of course, there were British geopolitical and economic long-term interests in Iraq that the British wanted to secure and protect: the oil concession; the commercial benefits from opening the country to a world economy dominated by Britain's vast economic power, including turning Iraq into a new market for British goods; protecting the British access to India; and ensuring Iraq remained within the British sphere of influence in Britain's regional and international conflicts, basically maintaining Iraq as Britain's junior ally. All of this required the establishment of a functional national state that the British had to help create and support. After the end of the First World War, and because of new developments in international politics following the war, as Toby Dodge correctly argues, the British thinking in Iraq had moved away from the traditional model of a direct colonial rule:

*The goal of creating a self-consciously 'modern' state made British colonial presence in Iraq different from previous versions of British rule throughout its Empire. After 1920, as new governmental institutions were built, it slowly became apparent to British officials that the Iraqi state was to be run by and for Iraqis. By the mid-1920s, it was realized (if not accepted) by the British administration that, with Iraq's entry into the League of Nations, the Iraqis running the state would, within a very short period of time, be given autonomy. Far from consciously creating an 'informal empire' in the Middle East, as some scholars have argued, the British in Iraq were very aware of the temporary nature of their tutelage.*<sup>(35)</sup>

Unlike the claims of the three documents, the establishment of the modern Iraqi state was not the direct or the inevitable consequence of the 1920 revolution, but of larger considerations related to the nature of international politics and Britain's difficulties in maintaining an empire under the traditional colonial framework.

*Between 1914 and 1932, the British government created the modern state of Iraq. In the aftermath of the World War I, British foreign policy was dominated by financial and military weakness, as President Woodrow Wilson and the United States were driving attempts to reestablish international order. Wilson strove to rework the Westphalian system, dating back to 1647, on a global, extra-European basis. At the heart of this project was the Mandate system, designed to establish the universal ideal of the sovereign state, with comparatively open markets and politically independent government. The creation of the Iraqi state represented a break with traditional territorial imperialism and signalled the beginning of the end of British international dominance. Under the Mandate system real political power had to be devolved to the institutions of the nascent Iraqi state and the Iraqi politicians running them.*<sup>(36)</sup>

The revolution only hastened and improved the British effort to establish this state, helping ultimately to defeat an already weakened argument within British political circles advocating direct rule in Iraq.<sup>(37)</sup>

Phebe Marr mentions the two phases in the British thinking about Iraq. In the early phase, the "direct rule" thesis dominated:

35 Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 2.

36 Ibid., p. 1.

37 The evidence is fairly solid that an Iraqi state under some kind of British supervision, similar to the monarchy that was established following the 1920 revolution, was in the works by the British, even before the revolution. On 17 June 1920, about thirteen days before the breakout of the revolution, the British government sent its recalcitrant acting civil commissioner in Iraq, Arnold Wilson, a telegram specifying its policy against Wilson's own wishes. The content of the telegram was made public in Iraq on 20 June: "His majesty's Government, having been entrusted with the Mandate for Mesopotamia, anticipate that Mandate will constitute Mesopotamia an Independent State under guarantee of the League of Nations and subject to the Mandate of Great Britain, that it will lay on them the responsibility for the maintenance of internal peace and external security, and will require them to formulate an organic law to be framed in consultation with people of Mesopotamia and with due regard to the rights, wishes and interests of all the communities of the country. The Mandate of Mesopotamia as self-governing state until such time as it can stand by itself, when the Mandate will come to an end." Philip Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (London: Jonathan Cape LTD, 1937), p. 220. The announcement goes further into explaining the details of the process of state-formation: "Sir P. Cox will be authorized to call into being, as provisional bodies, a Council of State under an Arab President and a General Elective Assembly, representative of and freely elected by the population of Mesopotamia. And it will be his duty to prepare in consultation with general Elective Assembly, the permanent organic law." Ireland, p. 221.

*The administration initially imposed on Iraq was overwhelmingly the work of men seconded from the India Office and was modelled largely on Britain's imperial structure in India. The philosophy guiding the group was largely based on nineteenth-century ideas of the 'white man's burden,' a predilection for direct rule, and a distrust of local Arabs' capacity for self-government. These attitudes deterred the appointment of local Arabs to positions of responsibility. Meanwhile, the British dismantled and supplanted the Ottoman administration as rapidly as possible. A new civil and criminal code based on Anglo-Indian laws replaced the old Turkish laws, the Indian rupee became the medium of exchange, and the army and police force were increasingly staffed with Indians.<sup>(38)</sup>*

Some of the main beneficiaries of this early phase were the same feudal lords and Sheikhs who, in the Middle Euphrates, rose against the British in 1920:

*Reversing Turkish tribal policy, which had aimed at weakening tribal leaders and bringing the tribes under the control of the central government, the British now attempted to restore tribal cohesion, to make the paramount shaikhs responsible for law and order and the collection of revenue in their districts, and to tie them to the nascent British administration through grants and privileges. This policy was applied not only in the Arab areas but also to the Kurdish provinces as they were taken. Efficient and economical, this policy reduced the need for highly paid British staff in the countryside, but ultimately it strengthened the hold of the shaikhs over their tribesmen and their land. Entrenchment of a class of landlord-shaikhs, though not wholly a British invention, was certainly one of the most lasting and problematic legacies of the Indian school.<sup>(39)</sup>*

This policy had not been pursued for long when the British government decided on a different approach,

the implementation of which was delayed at a great cost to the British:

*It was not long before the policies of the Indian school generated opposition both in Britain and Iraq. In March 1917 the British government issued a memo making it clear that an indigenous Arab government under British guidance was to be substituted for direct administration. As a response to the memo, the Anglo-Indian civil code was replaced by a return to Turkish courts and laws. However, little else was changed. Local British bureaucrats continued to strengthen their hold on the country, appointing few Arabs to senior positions. The result was not long in coming.<sup>(40)</sup>*

The 1920 revolution, as a result, put the final nail in the coffin of the direct-rule thesis, greatly speeding up the process of forming the new state and its institutions, a very complex and exacting process, to say the least. British interests required that Iraq be a unified state in the form of a constitutional monarchy. Moreover, it was a combination of British political influence and military might that protected Iraq's borders from the serious threats and potential destabilizing ambitions of two major regional powers, Turkey and Iran, and a third rising power of the Wahabist Ikhwan in what later became Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the British were invested in the rise of a "moderate" form of Iraqi nationalism, unlike the "extremist" one that they came to fight off, but still were willing to work with.<sup>(41)</sup> The British clearly had a stake in bringing Iraqis together through a national Iraqi government friendly to Britain. Gertrude Bell, the Oriental Secretary to the British High Commissioner in Iraq, Percy Cox — both of whom played a pivotal role in propping up the new state, after pointing out some state-formation challenges that the British were facing, writes in a letter to her family dated 14 November 1920:

*Oh, if we can pull this thing off; rope together the young hotheads and Shiah obscurantists, and enthusiasts like Jafar [Askary], polished*

38 Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Colorado: Westview Press 2012), p. 22.

39 Ibid., p. 23.

40 Ibid.

41 The terms of "moderate nationalists" and "extremist nationalist" or simply the "moderates" and the "extremists" were common in British documents and analyses of the time.

*old statesman like Sasun, and scholars like Shukuri— if we can make them work together and find their own salvation for themselves, what a fine thing it would be. I see visions and dream dreams. I omitted to mention that the council of State of the first Arab Govt. in Mesopotamia since the Abbasids meets to-morrow!*<sup>(42)</sup>

In her hopeful tone, Bell is fully aware of the daunting difficulty in bringing different, if not conflicting, forces in the Iraqi society to work together through a national government in which all Iraqis feel somehow represented. In the British pursuit to set up the new state in the final months of 1920 when the revolution was losing the military battle and the Middle Euphrates territory to the advancing and better-equipped British forces, the Shias emerged as a clear obstacle to the British pursuit. In a letter to her family sent on 1 November 1920, Bell describes the difficulty the British experienced in getting the Shia to cooperate with the provisional Naqib government that was in the process of being formed as one requirement to end the revolution:

*Jafar [Askary] also described his efforts to get into touch with the holy element in Kadhimain. He had been to the great people and tried to prove to them that the sole object of the Provisional Council summoned by the Naqib was to lay the foundations of National Institutions. But they would reply only that they wanted a govt. elected by the people, and that nothing else was of any use. 'But you can't hold a general election in a day,' said Jafar, 'and we want to get to work at once.' They offered no suggestion and remained obdurately hostile. 'What did you say next,' I asked. 'I was silent,' he answered. That's the Shiah attitude, and it's*

*only countrymen—so as Arabs can be called the countrymen of Persian divines—who will be able very gradually to bring them into line. Finally I hope a section will become definitely Arab and take a hand in the state...*<sup>(43)</sup>

Unlike what appears in the three documents as matter-of-fact British animosity to the Shia as one undifferentiated group, the British position was much more nuanced and in line with a common understanding about Iraqi nationalism within the colonial administration in Iraq.<sup>(44)</sup> This understanding was based on separating Iraqi nationals, particularly the tribal ones, from non-Iraqi religious Shi'i players, i.e., the Persian *mujtahids*, in the interest of a modern Iraqi national pact and politics not dominated or influenced by pre-modern religious Shi'i conceptions of politics that would grant a disproportionate amount of power to Shi'i *mujtahids*, mostly Iranian, in Iraq's national life.<sup>(45)</sup> This attempt to contain the influence of the Shi'i *mujtahids* and clergymen was one primary goal for the British and, later, the Iraqi monarchy. In handling the aftermath of the revolution, Cox insisted on sidelining the *mujtahids* when negotiating the surrender of the Middle Euphrates tribes and towns:

*Sir Percy has held strictly to his doctrine that a general amnesty must wait on submission. The Ulama have done their best to make him accept them as intermediaries; the tribes have repeatedly asked that negotiations should be conducted through the premier Mujtahid, at whose orders they would lay down arms. Sir Percy has stoutly refused—more power to him! The claim of the Ulama to lose and bind is one of the most formidable problems of the Arab State; the refusal to recognise their political authority is unmitigatedly to the good... And it's done with such skill, with such courtesy,*

42 Gertrude Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, Lady Bell (ed.), vol. 1 (London: Ernest Limited, 1927), p. 574.

43 Ibid., p. 572.

44 Early on, the British had a number of clear distinctions between the Shia clerical establishment and within this establishment also, on the one hand, and the tribal leaders, on the other hand. On 14 March 1920, Bell states the following in a letter to her step-mother: "It's a problem here how to get into touch with the Shi'ahs, not the tribal people in the country; we're on intimate terms with all of them; but the grimly devout citizens of the holy towns and more especially the leaders of religious opinion, the mujtahids, who can loose and bind with a word by authority which rests on an intimate acquaintance with accumulated knowledge entirely irrelevant to human affairs and worthless in any branch of human activity. There they sit in an atmosphere which reeks of antiquity and is so thick with the dust of ages that you can't see through it - nor can they. And for the most part they are very hostile to us, a feeling we can't alter because it's so difficult to get at them. I'm speaking of the extremists among them; there are a few with whom we are on cordial relations..." See: "Gertrude Bell Archive," *New Castle University*, accessed on 16 February 2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3zeNJgK>

45 King Faisal, and his government, later came to the same conclusion as was shown in his famous memorandum to his closest aides in 1931 about the importance of forming a people in Iraq. However, Faisal's approach to handle this challenge was different from the British by being more tactful and sensitive.

*the letters to the Ulama are such as Sir Percy alone knows how to write.*<sup>(46)</sup>

King Faisal himself, and with him the monarchy, continued this policy line. Peter Sluglett quotes a letter from Faisal to Cox about how to face the Shi'i mujtahids' fatwa in 1922, forbidding participation in the election of a constituent assembly that would eventually pass the Anglo-Iraqi treaty that the *mujtahids* vehemently opposed: "I am fully confident that if we succeed in winning over these shaykhs [Middle Euphrates Sheikhs] and separating them from the '*ulama*' who think that they are blindly obedient to them, we shall attain our desire to make a success of the elections and to ratify the Treaty without any trouble."<sup>(47)</sup> This realization by Faisal translated into government steps to realise this separation: "Judging by the considerable tax arrears of various Euphrates shaykhs which remained unpaid over the next few months, the Iraqi government seems to have come to the conclusion that the only means of detaching the shaykhs from the '*ulama*' was to press very lightly in matters touching revenue."<sup>(48)</sup>

Realizing the significant socio-economic loss they endured for rising in arms against the British, these Sheikhs pragmatically sought to soften the blows of British anger against them. They decided to use the election to mend their relations with the monarch and the British:

*It seems that the election experience of the Constituent Assembly was the sort of experience that gave the tribal chiefs who suffered the consequences of the great Iraqi revolution of the 1920 the opportunity to make personal gains and express support for the government in return for the government's intercession on their behalf with the British authorities*

*to pardon them and move beyond the past since these chiefs incurred British anger. In a meeting held at the royal palace at the end of March 1923, and attended by King Faisal I and a number of Middle Euphrates Sheikhs such as Sayyid Alwan al-Yasiri, Sheikh Abdul-Wahid Hajj Sikkar, Sayyid Qati' al-Awadi, Sheikh Shalan Abu-Aljon, and others, these chiefs asked the king to intercede on their behalf with the British High Commissioner to pardon them for what they committed against the British authorities during the occupation period and the 1920 revolution as well as forgiving their tax debts. They also requested the king's help to take back the land that was stripped of them, just like many other Sheikhs who were lucky enough to receive British patronage. In return for all of this, they pledged to the king to support the government plan to make the Constituent Assembly election a success by going to the '*ulama*' to try to convince them to change their fatwas that forbade participating in the election; otherwise, they would turn a deaf ear to these fatwas and participate in the election at the will of the government. The chiefs also pledged to the king that they will resist all those who oppose the election.*<sup>(49)</sup>

Contrary to the idealized image hurriedly constructed in the three documents of the Middle Euphrates Sheikhs in charge of the revolution as unbending nationalists, heroic fighters, and principled revolutionaries above considerations of self-interest, the historical evidence suggests otherwise. They were pragmatic human beings who were understandably defending their personal interests by trying to accommodate themselves to realities changing beyond their control. Eventually, the relations between the Middle

46 Bell, pp. 575-576. Many of the tribal leaders who rose against the British in 1920 tried to mend fences with the British after the revolution, even before the monarchy was established. In a letter she sent to her family on 8 July 1921, Bell writes, partly reflecting personal British bias and anger at these leaders: "One by one all the leaders of the rebellion are coming in to pay their respects. One came on Tuesday and got a fine dressing down first from me and then from Sir Percy. However he took it in good part and went away saying that he was delighted with Sir Percy! All the Sheikhs and Sayyids who fought against us are turning up also. I need not say that Sir Percy's handling of them is perfect...This morning an opportunity presented itself in which I could both do the right thing and the thing that pleased me-a rare combination. There came in one of the leaders of the revolt, a horrid worthless man ...and I was more icily rude to him than I've ever been to anyone. He had evidently hoped to climb back into some sort of esteem by being allowed to see Sir Percy; I gave him firstly clearly to understand that Sir Percy could not receive him and he retired in disorder. It was a great satisfaction." Bell, pp. 608-609.

47 Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 56.

48 Ibid., p. 57.

49 Hameed Ahmed Tameemi & 'Iqab Yousif Rikabi, *as-Sayyid 'Ilwān Al-Yāsiri: az-Za'ama Al-'Ash'ariyya Wa al-'amal Al-Waṭani* (Beirut & al-Najaf al-Shraf: Dar al-'arif lil-Matbū'āt, 2013), p. 246.

Euphrates Sheiks and feudal lords and the monarchy were mended. A deep and structural alliance between the two was forged and continued throughout the three decades and a half that followed until the final

days of the monarchy when these Sheiks and feudal lords lost all their disproportionate economic and political influence in republican Iraq.

## Conclusion

The shifting alliances and conflicts among the different Iraqi players on the one hand and between the British and the Iraqis on the other, all in pursuit of various personal interests and national goals suggest a very complex scene of actions, reactions and interactions within an evolving and multi-layered political context. The complexity of this context cannot be adequately understood or interpreted based on the simplistic dichotomy of Sunnis versus Shi'is.

Indeed, a careful analysis of Iraq's history during the monarchy and the republican era that followed can logically lead to the conclusion that the main drivers of conflict and competition in Iraq's national life were not sect-based or sectarian in nature, including the monumental event of the 1920 revolution.

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