

Countering the Sectarian Metanarrative: Iraqi Literary Response to the US Occupation

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Abstract

Sectarian conflict is a commonly understood concept that has largely shaped US foreign policy approach to the region throughout the modern Middle East. As a result of the conflict between Shia and Sunni militias in Iraq and the nature of Iraqi politics since 2003, many experts have accepted sectarianism as an enduring phenomenon in Iraq and use it as a foundation to understand Iraqi society. This paper problematizes the accepted narrative regarding the relevance of sectarian identity and demonstrates the fallacy of approaching Iraq through an exclusively “sectarian lens” in future foreign policy. This paper begins by exploring the role of the Iraqi intellectuals in the twentieth century and how political ideologies influenced and replaced traditional forms of identity. The paper then examines the common themes used by mid-twentieth century Iraqi literati to promote national unity and a sense of Iraqi identity that championed the nation’s heterogeneity. The paper then surveys the Iraqi literary response to the 2003 invasion in order to explain how some of the most popular Iraqi writers represent sectarianism in their works. The literary response to the US invasion and occupation provides a counter-narrative to western viewpoints and reveals the reality of the war from the Iraqi perspective. After considering works by Ahmed Saadawi, Hassan Blasim, and Sinan Antoon we find a conspicuous lack of emphasis on sectarianism as an essential element of identity in Iraqi society. To the contrary, most authors criticize sectarian ideologies with satire and contempt. The rise of sectarianism is often treated as an inorganic intrusion of divisive politics from foreign intervention, an antiquated past, or fringe elements of society. These contemporary authors show that sectarianism does not define Iraqis’ concepts of identity, but has instead torn the social fabric of Iraq through the oversimplification of complex notions of identity into a binary classification system. The paper concludes with a discussion on how experts and policy makers would be better informed about social undercurrents through the consideration of Iraqi literati and intellectuals who rarely serve in political offices, but are often more in touch with and representative of the people.

Introduction

The idea of heightened sectarianism in the Middle East is a commonly recognized fact in the United States and in the West more generally. To some extent this is true and does reflect part of the reality in many Arab countries, however it is only one aspect of the larger complex social environment. Ethno-sectarian tension is heightened in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. However, its emergence in the twenty-first century is largely due to foreign interference which has either intentionally stoked the flames in order to achieve geo-political objectives or has misunderstood (and inflated) the role of sectarian identity among average citizens. In reality sectarianism previously functioned as a relatively minor political identity, and was an unimportant issue for common citizens when compared to the larger issues plaguing these countries throughout the twentieth century. To the Western audience, the Shia-Sunni conflict is presented as a religiously motivated and historically pertinent split that created an enduring tradition of contempt between the two predominant groups of Muslims that has essentially evolved into the modern geo-political competition between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. According to the generalized accepted narrative, Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni majority throughout the Middle East while Iran represents the Shia cause. The embellishment of sectarianism is an important stratagem in the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional hegemony, which has spilled over into proxy wars in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, the Arabian Gulf, and elsewhere.

Generalized Iraqi History

No place represents the modern ethno-sectarian struggles in the Middle East more than Iraq; its recently ascendant majority Shia population against the Sunni minority who

struggles to maintain the power which they enjoyed under the Saddam regime. Meanwhile the Kurdish population in northern Iraq further complicates the ethno-sectarian conflict with consistent calls for more autonomous rule and even an independent and sovereign Kurdish state. According to the generally informed western audience, the three sided conflict between the Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish populations was a predictable outcome ever since the Iraqi borders were drawn in 1920 from three different Ottoman provinces. Setting aside the ambitions of Kurdish autonomy, the Shia-Sunni divide is observed as an enduring and existential truism that is critical to understanding the history of the Middle East. American experts such as W. Patrick Lang, former head of Middle East Affairs and Counterterrorism at the Defense Intelligence Agency, have collectively accepted the antagonistic relationship between religious groups as *prima facie*:

One of the problems is Iraq is not a nation state. It is a state or government with territory that includes several different nations [of people] who think of themselves as belonging to these ethno-religious groups rather than primarily to the state. Iraq has been held together since 1921 by coercion. We unscrewed the lid on that bottle, and you see the fruits of that process in the streets of Iraq today.¹

Continuous repetition of this generalized notion of Iraqi socio-demographic relationship along sectarian lines has created an echo chamber of opinions in public forums, expert interviews, and government reports that fail to consider opposing viewpoints or alternative explanations. Many experts have attempted to disrupt the assumption that sectarian violence originates from primordial religious solidarities and instead proven “in fact tensions are actively produced by political interventions,” but this body of research

¹ Beehner, L. “Lang: Political Process Will Move Forward in Iraq, Despite Sectarian Violence”, Council on Foreign Relations, February, 24, 2006.

remains largely ignored in the media or official policies.² Another popular argument points to the Sunni favoritism exhibited by the Saddam Hussein regime whose high-ranking Ba'ath Party officials were predominantly Sunni and a de facto hierarchy existed which empowered Sunni Arabs over Shia. This false attribution originates from Saddam Hussein's preference to appoint the most trusted people in his inner circle which came from family and tribal, not religious, affiliation. It should also be noted that Saddam's pivot to a system of favoritism was a dramatic deviation from Ba'ath Party's original policy that categorically "rejects religious sectarianism, racism, and tribalism."³ The regime's violent suppression of the Shia and Kurdish uprisings are further evidence to support this view because it specifically targeted groups based along ethno-sectarian lines. Such observations fail to consider the context in which such events occurred, notably that the uprisings were encouraged by external influences such as the US and Iran. In reality Saddam inconsistently employed various (and often conflicting) tribal, religious, sectarian, secular, historical, and nationalist rhetoric and symbolism in his propaganda that did promote ethno-sectarian identities to the socioeconomic and political detriment of some Shi'as. However, such attempts "failed to widely permeate the fabric of everyday life for the majority" of Iraqis who rarely operated exclusively along sectarian identities.⁴

The lack of consideration of differing opinions has led to widespread acceptance that sectarianism is an indisputable fact in Iraq and continues to be a foundation for US foreign and military policy in Iraq. Reidar Visser's research provides an excellent

² Damlujti, Mona. "Securing Democracy in Iraq: Sectarian Politics and Segregation in Baghdad, 2003-2007", *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2010), p. 72.

³ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 18 July 1968. Baram, A. "Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-96." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 1 (1997): 1.

⁴ Damlujti. "Securing Democracy in Iraq" p. 73.

understanding of how western media contribute to a sectarian metanarrative through various reporting methods. The tendency of news reports to include sectarian identities despite being irrelevant to the story, incorrectly interpret political developments, or attribute an individual's opinion or actions as representative of an entire monolithic sectarian group are just a few examples of how the western media reinforce the sectarian metanarrative.⁵ This represents an over-simplification of a multifaceted society that consists of competing historical, cultural, philosophical, political, and religious elements in the complex modern geopolitical setting which will be further elaborated. The "rigid and uncritical assumptions about religion, society, and power" approach to Iraq concerned many experts within the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).⁶ Unfortunately many of the trepidations of experts went unheeded and the transitional government proceeded on the assumption that Iraq was simply the amalgamation of monolithic communities whose religion defined their political groups.⁷ The fact that the US has misunderstood Iraqi social dynamics is not even debated among Arabs, especially Iraqis, the real debate focuses on whether or not it was intentional. Many Iraqis subscribe to the belief that the sectarian metanarrative was an intentional neo-colonialist conspiracy intended to divide and conquer the country in the style of the British mandate.⁸ Most objective observers see the sectarian metanarrative as "something originating in a more innocent desire in ignorant individuals to navigate and interpret a complex world of

⁵ Visser, Reidar. "The Western Imposition of Sectarianism on Iraqi Politics." *The Arab Studies Journal* 15/16, no. 2/1 (2007): 83-97.

⁶ Damlujti, M. "Securing Democracy in Iraq" p. 73.

⁷ International Crisis Group. "The Next Iraq War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict," *Middle East Report* 52 (2006), 8.

⁸ Based on the author's interviews with scholars and multiple Iraqi-Americans who immigrated after the 2003 invasion

which they have only limited knowledge.”⁹ The most obvious reason to doubt a metanarrative conspiracy is the fact that such an approach would empower the majority Shia population in Iraq which would (and, in fact, did) benefit the regional ambitions of Iran, who is the biggest adversary to the US in the Middle East.

By approaching Iraq, and the Middle East more broadly, through a sectarian lens the US continues to feed fundamentalists’ narratives and play into the hands of Iranian and Saudi strategies which attempt to utilize religious identity as a way to encourage social tension and garner support from the population. This strategy of regional actors subverts long-term US policy objectives for peace and stability in the Middle East yet we continue to search for solutions based on this false dichotomy. Iraq remains critical to regional stability so it is crucial that we move beyond a simplistic and generalized understanding that fails to examine the nuances beyond the misleading political narratives. Iraq has been the emphasis of US foreign policy in the Middle East for over three decades therefore it should be expected that policy makers and policy implementers should have a deeper understanding of Iraqi social realities beyond the politically motivated exaggerations made by local officials and radical leaders.

Addressing the Problem

According to the US military policy in Iraq, the objective during the post-2003 occupation was to "win the hearts and minds" in order to effectively counter subversive elements which challenge national and regional stability. Policymakers and military commanders considered “hearts and minds” to be a critical step in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism strategies. Convincing the local populace that American forces were

⁹ Visser, Reidar. "The Sectarian Master Narrative in Iraqi Historiography." *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*. 49.

genuinely concerned for their safety and wellbeing would garner trust. Establishing sincere trust with Iraqis at the individual level would deny malign actors from a source of safe haven and recruiting within local communities. A positive interaction with the public would degrade enemy capability more effectively than any weapons or intelligence collection because it would deny insurgents the most important terrain; the people. Therefore trust from the people would improve the ability for coalition and Iraqi forces to provide security, which was paramount for the Iraqi government to be able to effectively govern the country during the occupation.

Considering the importance of public approval during the counterinsurgency, it is somewhat perplexing that the US generally ignored such an influential group of educated Iraqis. The literati community took full advantage of the post-invasion environment which promoted freedoms of expression that did not exist under Saddam's regime. Any entrepreneur with a printing press was able to open a magazine or newspaper publication, and soon the streets were flooded with publications that represented a plethora of ideas, new and old, that appealed to a wide range of Iraqi readers. Other literati utilized modern technology, instead of traditional methods, to broadcast their theses, poems, short stories, and philosophies over the internet. The literati community re-emerged from the shadows of Ba'ath Party censorship and wrote sharp criticisms that had previously only been a possibility for exiled intellectuals. Despite the availability of numerous ideas and opinions coming out of the budding intellectual movements, it appears the US was not aware of its importance to understanding the social environment. The lack of proficient Arabic is partly to blame for the lack of considerations, however even in the instances when coalition authorities did actually read the material it was largely disregarded as

meaningless negative criticism from uninformed outsiders. With the benefit of hindsight we now see that the opposite is likely the case. It is important to examine why such an opportunity was missed by officials to objectively survey public opinion from the intellectuals who produced literature that represented the thoughts and desires of common Iraqis.

Simply put, there is no modern equivalent in the US to understand the clout that the Iraqi literati possess. Authors and poets do not have the same social collateral or political impact in the US as the intellectuals enjoy in Iraq. Many countries, especially Arab countries with rich history, have a Ministry of Culture which exists to preserve national heritage and history. However there is no equivalent 'Department of Culture' in the US and it would be a strange concept to Americans if the US Poet Laureate was represented in the executive cabinet alongside the Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense. In addition to the lack of familiarity regarding intellectual representation in the executive cabinet, Ministries of Culture in Arab countries, especially Iraq under Saddam, have unfortunately been more often used as the primary medium for state propaganda, which reduces credibility to western governments. The (mis)use of Ministry of Culture for authoritarian propaganda has only contributed to western suspicions and dismissive attitudes toward a potential source of vital information regarding Iraqi society. Despite the Ministries of Culture being generally ignored by US policymakers; they represent the influential nature of the literati because it gives them a direct role in the government.

Additionally, there are few examples of contemporary philosophers or intellectuals having much influence on American politics aside from a few such as Noam Chomsky or Jürgen Habermas. However, the influence of these exceptions pales in

comparison to the influence that intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, or Ayn Rand had, who were more influential on twentieth century social movements. Contemporary intellectuals are less prominent among American audiences. This abdication of philosophical responsibility in the twenty-first century is sometimes blamed on technological advances which can answer questions through scientific method rather than dialectic or deductive reasoning.¹⁰ General awareness is more driven by modern media platforms that focus more on government leaders as representatives of political philosophies and movements. In fact many argue that the emergence of celebrity philosophers in Germany has been largely criticized as attenuating the efficacy of their ideas by creating an industry of consumable philosophy that strips ideas of their complexity.¹¹ There are very few western writers who are rising to prominence because their works are representative of audiences' outlook in the way that Iraqi authors continue to do. The cultural differences surrounding the influence of the intellectual community on social and political movements is another reason the literati are generally ignored. The unfamiliarity with the literati leverage denied US policymakers and implementers from truly comprehending the social undercurrents and layered convolutions that exist beyond what was presented by Iraqi officials and politicians.

Method

This project attempts to provide a different approach to resolving the discrepancy of the accepted account about the enduring tradition of sectarian divide by examining how Iraqi literati are writing in response to the US invasion and subsequent occupation in modern fiction. The Iraqi literary response to the US occupation is a relevant focus

¹⁰ Debrock, Guy. "Peirce, a Philosopher for the 21st Century: Part I Introduction." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1992, 4-5.

¹¹ Jeffries, Stuart. "Pop Goes German Philosophy." *Foreign Policy*, no. 225, 2017, 72 – 73.

because it represents the popular thinking among Iraqis in the modern context. The variety of experiences during the war, emergence of new mediums of publication, and the sudden removal of strict government censorship by the Ba'athists resulted in a plethora of material written in response to events after April 2003. As will be elaborated later, there is a significant difference between the US and Iraqi narratives regarding the nature of the occupation. One cause for the widely skewed perspectives is that US accounts are far more prevalent in the media. Thousands of stories have been told in books and in film by American writers, movie and television producers, officials' memoirs, and countless former soldiers. Only a few of these accounts make an honest attempt to present the "other" perspective, this imbalance of viewpoints further slants the general view of Western audiences.

US policymakers and military commanders with vested interests in understanding the country have habitually discounted the influential Iraqi intellectual class. The literati, intellectuals such as writers, poets, novelists, playwrights, and singers who are not directly involved with the government, often have their finger on the pulse of Iraqi society more so than politicians. Politicians use manipulative political jargon and social engineering in a way that simplifies or misconstrues complex social situations in a way in order to gain political power. The literati write to in order to capture the essence of the Iraqi experience and to represent Iraq as they and their readers have known and experienced it. These writers utilize their unique styles to promote their own individual views which attempt to broadly represent the experiences and views of all Iraqis. The successful writers are those who adeptly capture the common sentiment experience of average Iraqi citizens. Unfortunately, the general tendency of western audiences,

diplomatic experts, and leaders has been to dismiss any academic scrutiny or literary representation that contradicted the accepted narratives about the Iraqi social conditions.¹² In the textual analysis of these contemporary writers we will identify common themes about the nature of the occupation, the perception of occupation forces, as well as conceptions of identity at the individual and national level. Many of these views have gone unnoticed by most western Middle East experts who instead choose to rely on the public statements and official reports, leaving themselves susceptible to manipulative rhetoric and political signaling to represent the opinions of Iraqis.

This project looks specifically at the works of Sinan Antoon, Ahmad Sadaawi, and Hassan Blasim to understand how the Iraqi literary response to the 2003 US invasion questions the accepted Western narrative regarding the importance of sectarianism in Iraq. These authors are well received by Iraqi audiences and have been distinguished with international recognition and awards. Each of the authors is politically active and serves as a cultural ambassador representing the twenty-first century Iraqi zeitgeist. The themes of their works are supported by non-fiction accounts of intellectuals responding to the US occupation in memoirs, interviews, and analysis. Works of fiction are an important form of political activism in Iraq, and it is important to note that the popularity of the authors chosen in this project is based on their ability to accurately express Iraqi feelings. The popularity and acclaim for the authors chosen shows that their works are an accurate representation of Iraqi social sentiment. We see how sectarianism is represented in these novels as a minor part of the larger social landscape and often counters official narratives regarding sectarian identity in Iraq before and during the invasion.

¹² Harling, Peter. "Beyond Political Ruptures: History of Social Continuity in Iraq" *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*, 62.

Role of Intellectuals in Modern Iraqi Society

Intellectuals and Iraqi Nationalism

The influence of the intellectual in Iraqi culture pre-dates the modern state of Iraq, dating back to Baghdad during the pre-Islamic era, and it has had a prominent role in Iraqi society for the past century. In the medieval Islamicate world, Baghdad was an urban cultural hub not only for the Arab world but also for the broader global intellectual community. Beginning as the cradle of civilization where writing was first invented¹³ and continuing through the Abbasid House of Wisdom, intellectuals were drawn to Baghdad for centuries because of its erudite reputation and cultural influence. Polymaths such Al-Jahiz and Al-Kindi, theologians such as Al-Ghazali, and scholars like Jabir ibn Hayyan and Al-Khwarizimi all flocked to Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age. This trend of scholars migrating to Baghdad continued well into the twentieth century when exiled intellectuals like Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Abdul Rahman Munif found a sense of home among the fervent literati community in the middle of the century. They found an active intellectual community that consisted of Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, and ‘Ali al-Wardi who presented new and often conflicting philosophies and were fueled by their nationalism.

The intellectual community that existed during the Ottoman Empire began to identify with nationalist ideas as soon as the British occupied Baghdad in 1917 and replaced Ottoman rule. Iraq formed as a modern state under British Mandate in 1920 from the Ottoman *wilayets* of Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, each of which had enjoyed some autonomy, general self-sufficiency, rule by their own forces, authorities and

¹³ Sampson, Geoffrey. *Writing Systems: A Linguistic Introduction*. London: Hutchinson, 1985.

hierarchies within the Ottoman state.¹⁴ The Ottoman government was content with the status quo as long as it received regular financial contributions. Because Iraq's formation was drawn from arbitrary borders, it was a state before it was ever a nation.¹⁵ The amalgamation of various groups with disparate religious and philosophical beliefs led to a large quantity of "overlapping theoretical and actual entities in terms of which they [Iraqis] could imagine their inclusion" in the newly formed Iraqi state.¹⁶ Many of the intellectuals came from the effendi class who served as officials of the Ottoman state and had extensive educational backgrounds. These intellectual elites understood ideas of nationalism, patriotism, and constitutions from their European educations and put these concepts to work while working within for the Iraqi monarchy under the British Mandate.

Different ideas emerged in the 1920s about how individuals imagined the nation and soon intense dialogues emerged from the Iraqi people. The dialogue played out in the public dialogues between intellectual groups and led to a multiplicity of shifting groupings who publicly contended with overlapping themes of Islam, Iraqi nationalism, political affiliations, ethnicity, history, and culture. These were important elements to individual identity and much of the debate centered on the precedence in which these factored into Iraq's national identity. Resistance to British rule was a common theme that originated from numerous tribal and religious motivations and soon these groups coalesced into an uneasy alliance. The 1920 Revolution against British rule effectively created a unifying topic based on anti-British sentiment despite the lack of common

¹⁴ Zubaida, Sami. "The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2, 2002, 205.

¹⁵ "Nation" in this sense refers to a large group of people inhabiting a territory connected by history, culture, ethnicity, religion. "State" refers to a sovereign territory in the modern context with an internationally recognized governing body.

¹⁶ Zubaida. "The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq." 206.

ground on visions about Iraq's future. Some religious leaders continued traditional sectarian suspicions in the new state but most effendi "abandoned traditional sectarianism in favor of Muslim unity, Sunni and Shia, against European imperialism"¹⁷

Most Iraqi intellectual elites became increasingly acquainted with western culture and ideas between the 1920s and 1950s as more Iraqis were educated in American and European universities. The intellectuals merged traditional and cultural models with progressive and western ideas that resulted in a pluralist society that "constructed narratives reflecting the interests of Arab nationalism in the language of the Western metropolis" by mid-century.¹⁸ Debates within the intellectual community largely reflected the dialogues that were taking place in cities and villages throughout Iraq. Some intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century, such as Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri and al-Wardi saw the 'public intellectual' as having a moral obligation to voice public opinion in an informed manner and challenge any political regime that could lead to the decline of their society.¹⁹ The active role of the intellectual was strongly influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's argument that writers exist in order to respond to the demands of society.²⁰ Literati were expected to address social topics through public dialectic processes that could hold opinions accountable. Sati' al-Husri saw philosophers and writers as a very powerful group that stimulated social change through their ideas much like the Enlightenment philosophers influenced the changes from the 18th to 20th century in America, Europe, and Russia.

¹⁷ Ibid. 206-9.

¹⁸ Bashkin, Orit. *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq*. 4-5.

¹⁹ Bashkin, Orit. "Advice from the Past: 'Ali al-Wardi on Literature and Society" *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*. 13 -15.

²⁰ Musawi, Mushin. *Reading Iraq*. 113.

Other intellectuals disagreed with such lofty expectations. Popular Iraqi thinkers such as Mahmud Ahmad Al-Sayyid saw the intellectual community as essentially powerless in political arenas and were merely replicating popular views without advocating any actual change.²¹ They further criticized that historically the power of the intellectuals such as the Ottoman effendi class came from the authority of the state, not the power of their ideas. They were traditionally never really representatives of the people but simply administrators and court servants to the Sultan.²² Therefore the educated elite should not think of themselves as powerful agents of change, because they were provided with their influence from powers that be only so far as they supported the ruler's message. Another opponent to politically active intellectuals was Jabra Ibrahim Jabra who supported the idea that artists and writers should produce "art for art's sake" that was more focused on aesthetics than political influence. From this perspective, the intellectuals should not be troubled with the trivial daily happenings of politics because their role was the pursuit and production of beauty and representing truth through high art. Eventually, the contested role of the intellectual ultimately gave way in the 1950s to the idea that intellectuals should have an active role in reforming, if not overthrowing, the Hashemite state and their British overlords.²³ The emergence of multiple political, philosophical, social, and economic movements present at the same moment led to a tense exchange of ideas that chaotically guided the country to independence and through a series of coups and counter-coups until 1968.

²¹ Bashkin, Orit. "Advice from the Past: 'Ali al-Wardi on Literature and Society" from *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*. 18-20.

²² Hanoosh, Yasmeen. "Contempt: State Literati vs. Street Literati in Modern Iraq" *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 43(2/3). 2012, 378.

²³ Musawi, Mushin. 115.

Nationalist fervor that began in 1920 strengthened as the intellectual community in Iraq grew. An existing pattern of urbanization increased during British Mandate Iraq and led to more educational opportunities for the urban middle class much to the concern of Mandate officials.²⁴ Some intellectuals held favorable attitudes towards authoritarianism and fascist models²⁵ while others promoted democratic, socialist, communist ideals. Political ideologies promoted by intellectuals inspired significant opposition movements and events such as demonstrations and protests since the country's inception and largely influenced the series of coups in 1936, 1941, 1958, 1963, and 1968. Many intellectuals, such as the al-Ahali social democratic group, used their influence in the early years of Iraq's nationhood to remain vocal critics of the state. The al-Ahali group's publications focused on issues such as inefficient land management programs, foreign influence over the Hashemite rulers, and economic struggles.

State literati, like nationalist al-Husri, supported the government and took positions within the ministries, universities, and (legal) press.²⁶ Intellectuals worked both inside and outside of the government. Famous philosophers, poets, and novelists worked in state-run universities, or as bureaucrats and technocrats guiding the Iraqi governments from the inside. The Ministry of Culture was an important hub for literati, but they also worked in other areas of government. These 'insiders' hoped to direct the future of Iraq away from the era of dysfunction and corruption by getting the intellectuals more involved with government administration. Street literati tended to congregate in cafes, reading clubs, labor and student unions, and published banned newspapers and

²⁴ Bashkin, Orit. "Advice from the Past: 'Ali al-Wardi on Literature and Society'" from *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*. 18.

²⁵ Wien, Peter. *Iraqi Arab Nationalism*. 113.

²⁶ Bashkin, O. "Advice from the Past" 13-15.

pamphlets. Some state-employed intellectuals anonymously published criticism of the government. It is important to note that the identity of “insider” and “outsider” was a fluid and evolving relationship during the mid-20th century due to the revolving door of national leadership. Even without regime changes some individuals, such as poet Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, simply changed their philosophical opinion or political affiliation. This contempt between those “inside” and “outside” continued and became more nuanced in the late-twentieth century due to the role and influence of intellectual exiles beginning in 1968 and increasing throughout Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Gradually groups and movements opposed to the British, Hashemite, Qasim, and other governments until 1968 were drawn more and more to the left. The Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) became one of the most prominent political forces and it used intellectuals to organize and mobilize the oppressed population into a cohesive and focused effort based on the Leninist revolutionary model.²⁷ Like the al-Ahali, the ICP embraced the role of the intellectual as a committed outside agitator and critic of the state whose writing should channel the population’s feelings of despair and defeat into radicalization and action, an ideology that made them natural targets of the state. The intellectual community always had an influential role in the Iraqi nation. Party leaders were not always from the educated elite, but they were always engaged in the dialectic with literati who published responses to events and opinions as they developed.

The military coup of 1958 which brought Abd al-Karim Qasim to power was a significant moment in Iraqi history because it ended British control over the country by leaving the Baghdad Pact. The use of overt religious symbolism by the educated elites previously directed against the British quickly diminished from serious political

²⁷ Bashkin, Orit. “Advice from the Past”

ideological discussions after Qasim took over the country. The removal of British intervention from Iraq also removed the unifying motivation for the political movements that had united under the umbrella of anti-colonialism. The lack of common interests or common enemies among the political movements created more tension as the focus shifted toward domestic issues and how the country should be governed. The 1950s and 60s were defined by the emergence of numerous and competing secular ideologies that played out in public discourses. This also led to social divisions along political philosophies such as Arab-Nationalism, socialism, communism, democracy, and capitalism. Attitudes and relations among individuals and within political parties were also strained in reaction to the events that were taking place during the mid-century. The context of the Cold War, the rising popularity of the non-aligned movement, the Palestinian problem, and the Nasserist agenda became more pronounced in the mid-20th century which simultaneously diminished emphasis on ethnic, sectarian, or class affiliations even further.²⁸

After 1958 the most notable rivalry between Iraqi political parties emerged between the Communist and Ba'ath Parties. The ICP was strongly supported by the have-nots of Iraq, most notably among the Shia community which had traditionally been prevented from prominent government positions dating back to the Ottoman Empire and had only recently been given more opportunities to work within the state system. The Ba'ath Party was based on pan-Arabism that was nominally secular (though considering Islam as an important part of 'Arabism') that generally appealed to Sunni Muslims. The political rivalries in mid-20th century Iraq did not remain peacefully reserved to civil discourses in publications, and instead led to open hostilities against the government as

²⁸ Musawi, Mushin. *Reading Iraq*. 68.

well as within both parties until the Ba'ath party seized control of the country in 1968. The Ba'athist Coup in 1968 was the beginning of the end for political freedoms and open criticism against the government by intellectuals in Iraq. The Ba'ath Party effectively limited the influence of the intellectual community in its effort to eliminate ideas subversive to the state. The ICP was officially outlawed and its members were ruthlessly hunted and executed by the Ba'ath Party. The incessant search for Communist party members and sympathizers became one of Saddam's most prominent domestic policies recounted in modern Iraqi fiction.

Intellectual Concepts of Iraqi Identity

Beginning with Iraq's creation in 1920 there were a plethora of ideas about what it meant to be Iraqi. During a complex period of intellectual enlightenment, perspectives of Iraqi national identity became a budding topic that was also used to reinforce the validity of particular political maneuvering. The two most significant opinions of Iraqi identity by scholars can be generally summarized by the competing narratives between Hanna Batatu and Ali al-Wardi, who each wrote about the nature of Iraqi society and national unity in the twentieth century. Ali al-Wardi (1913 – 1995) was one of the most influential social scientists in modern Iraqi history who published numerous books on the nature of Iraqi society. He was known for his purity and the unique ability to remain separated and uncorrupted by politics and ideology which was demonstrated by his choice to retire from his prominent post at the University of Baghdad when the government began efforts to force social science curricula to reinforce Ba'athist ideology. Al-Wardi viewed Iraq through historic and traditional foundations, located at the epicenter of an ideological conflict between Shia and Sunni Islam. He placed tribalism as

an important element of Iraqi society and identity and discounted the idea that the 1920 revolt against the British was indicative of a rise of Iraqi nationalism via anti-colonialist unity. Instead al-Wardi claimed that the event was better characterized as a “tribal uprising fueled by the narrow self-interests of tribal sheikhs” with no unified political or nationalist ideology.²⁹

Sati al-Husri was evidence of al-Wardi’s assertion because he saw all Shias as traitors who demonstrated more loyalty to Iran than to Iraq. Cautious of any Persian connections, al-Husri used his prejudice to discriminate against hiring Shia to prominent positions in the Ministry of Education. King Faisal I also saw the problems facing his country in the early 1920s through a sectarian perspective, blaming the religious and sectarian tension for impeding nationalism which in his eyes would be the embrace of his monarchy by the educated elite. Instead of considering the complex political environment, he summarized that Iraq was “a Sunni government that rules over ignorant Kurdish and Shi’i sects that are actively hostile to the government.”³⁰ The sectarian opinions expressed by King Faisal I and al-Husri were not the exception and reinforced British orientalist perceptions about the conservative and unchanging traditions which conveniently and concisely defined an imagined monolithic Iraqi society. Much of al-Wardi’s work experienced a revival in the 1990s and contributed to problematizing the push for modernity and democratization after the 2003 invasion.³¹ Al-Wardi’s character as a scholar uncorrupted by political ideology and the apparent clarity of his understanding of Iraqi society (due to post-invasion events) along traditional tribal and

²⁹ Koury, Dina Rizk. “History and Society of Iraq between Hanna Batatu and Ali al-Wardi” *Al-Muntaqa*. Vol. 1, No. 2 (2018). 97.

³⁰ Bashkin, Orit. *The Other Iraq*. 128-131.

³¹ Koury, D. “History and Society of Iraq,” 98.

sectarian lines has renewed interest from scholars who support his account of Iraqi nationalism.

It is important to place some of the observations made by al-Wardi within their appropriate context. King Faisal's negative views did not endure throughout his rule and were generally more inclusive once the Iraqi nation-state became more widely accepted as a permanent arrangement. Initially the national government under Faisal was composed of Sunni effendi who remained in similar positions from the Ottoman Empire. As early as 1923 Faisal expressed his desire to integrate Shia intellectuals into the state but was hindered by his own ministers and officials who feared, distrusted, and excluded Shia.³² The fear and exclusion of Shia intellectuals from prominent positions was due to concerns that ideological, religious, and familial ties to Iran could compromise loyalty to the young Iraqi nation. What is even more interesting about al-Husri's protective attitude towards Iraqi institutions is that he himself was born in Yemen to an Allepine family who were among the Ottoman officers who were appointed to positions in the Iraqi government by King Faisal. He had no personal origins or ties to Iraq and was well-known for his Turkish accent yet he was questioning the loyalty of Iraqis such as Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri due to their Iranian background. Sectarian discrimination was primarily a tool by administrators and technocrats such as al-Husri for self-preservation and ensuring job security by preventing a more inclusive system. Regardless of the justifications, al-Wardi's perspective was heavily influenced by his experiences, as a Shia intellectual, with sectarian discrimination. However, by mid-century many of these unofficial policies had become less common with the rise of political parties whose ideologies became more influential to individual identity. By the late 1950s al-Wardi's

³² Zubaida, S. 212.

works were no longer popular among Iraqi intellectuals, and he openly expressed his feeling of being marginalized after the 1958 revolution. After the renaissance of philosophical, political ideologies in the 1950s further reduced any traditional identity pattern that may have existed, Al-Wardi was unable to fully grasp the shift in Iraqi society because he was unable to explain it through his rigid framework. Therefore, although many have found al-Wardi's concepts useful for explaining the escalated sectarian tension of the 21st century, it is worth noting that such models were largely disregarded by the 1960s as valid models.³³

In contrast to the traditionalist models, intellectuals such as Hanna Batatu, a Palestinian Marxist, had very different perceptions about the history and true nature of Iraqi society. Batatu agreed that animosities existed between the Shia and Sunni of Iraq but he further explains that the nature of the division was also due to class stratification. Since many Shias did not participate in the Ottoman state, they were naturally “outsiders” until the late 19th century. Batatu then points to 1920 as the beginning of the modernization process for Iraqi society which became unified in the armed uprising against the British. Batatu concedes that the 1920 revolution began as a tribal affair but explained that it created a nationalist mythology in the national consciousness and a sense of community. This new form of loyalty; nationalism, “did not displace the old [sectarian] loyalties. Although it grew at their expense, existed side by side with them, corroding them...”³⁴ It comes as no surprise that a Marxist intellectual would frame the modern history of Iraqi society around class and status, but his work adeptly explains how organizations and parties transcended sectarian identity and created an atmosphere

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Batatu, Hanna. *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*. 1978., 22.

in which various forms of allegiances united around the national project.³⁵ Batatu shared the view with many Iraqis that the diversity of Iraq based on religious, ethnic, and racial differences was historically one of the strengths of Iraq's long history. He contended that traditional allegiances were created during the Ottoman Empire because of sectarian bias, nepotism, and different legal codes between urban and tribal areas.

Batatu's emphasis that traditional tribal and sectarian allegiances would diminish and eventually disappear as modernization and national integration continued was a widely accepted narrative by Iraqis and scholars well into the 21st century.³⁶ Prior to 2006 most scholars pointed to Batatu's work as the starting point for anyone studying modern Iraqi history without much consideration for al-Wardi's contribution other than as an additional resource from a traditionalist Shia perspective.³⁷ Due to the sectarian violence dominating the narrative of the US invasion, Batatu's work has now paradoxically become a sort of counter narrative to the current description of Iraqi events almost exclusively along sectarian lines. Meanwhile al-Wardi's views about the primacy of religion in Iraq which quickly fell out of favor for over a half-century due to a lack of relevance have been seemingly vindicated by western media. Despite the sectarian tendency of western reports, many scholars such as Peter Sluglett, Lawrence Potter, Fanar Haddad, Ussama Makdisi, and numerous others continue to de-emphasize the role of sectarian identity in Iraqi society to little avail. As we shall see in the textual analysis section most modern Iraqi writers also make deliberate efforts to portray sectarianism as a minor, if not totally fabricated, concept of identity. Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

³⁵ Koury, D. "History and Society of Iraq," 95.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 97- 99.

³⁷ Farouk-Sluglett, Marion and Peter Sluglett. "The Historiography of Modern Iraq" *The American Historical Review*. Vol 96 No. 5 (1991). 1409.

specifically makes this point while promoting Batatu's work as the most accurate description of the modern history of Iraqi society.

In summary, the imagining of Iraqi identity was an evolving concept during the twentieth century. The generation born during the Ottoman Empire prior to World War I expressed a general ambivalence or indifference towards national identity. The next generation emerging during the decline and fall of the Ottomans borrowed concepts of nationalism from European thinkers and merged them with traditional ideas. This generation accepted the heterogeneous nature of the Iraqi national identity with cohesive elements such as shared history and a common language in a way that was similar to the formation of European countries such as Germany and Yugoslavia. The dissatisfaction under the British Mandate and the monarchy made the next generation of Iraqis wary of Europeans and resulted in the advent of subnational identities along ethno-sectarian lines and a divergence between Modern and Islamist thought in the late 1930s and 1940s. The intellectuals in the 1950s solidified the establishment of Iraqi nationalist identity, and individual identity along political affiliation became more common during the rise of Pan-Arabism, Arab Socialism, Arab Nationalism, Islamism, Communism, and other emerging ideologies. The Iraqi national identity was fluid and nebulous at first but it eventually became more specific through a contentious process during a complex era of history. After the Ba'athist coup in 1968, Iraqi national identity continued to coalesce under the direction of the regime. After Saddam's rise to power in 1979, the Ba'ath Party controlled the narrative through propaganda and the suppression of political opposition, and it reduced Iraqi national identity to loyalty to the state in order to serve the interests of the regime. Saddam used the concept of Iraqi identity as a method of solidifying

control over the people by arresting, exiling, imprisoning, torturing, or killing those who demonstrated views contrary to Ba'athist ideologies. The authoritarian actions of the Ba'ath Party did have a unifying result on Iraqi identity, but not in the way that Saddam had expected. For many Iraqis the oppression and sense of suffering endured during Saddam's regime became a communal experience defined by the war against Iran, the First Gulf War, the period of international sanctions, and ending with the US invasion of 2003.

Literary Themes of Nationalism

The intellectual movement in Iraq led to new political ideologies represented in civic dialogues that were reflected in the developments of the Iraqi literary production. Political ideologies were subtly included in poetry, songs, screenplays, and novels under the more overt themes of nationalism. Islamic culture and Arab identity were important themes that are found in the literary production of the twentieth century especially due to the spread of Arab nationalism. Iraqi writers and poets took deliberate steps to establish the identity of the Iraq nation as distinctly separate from the more broadly defined Pan-Arab movement. This literary production, especially during the mid-20th century, played a crucial role in imagining Iraq as a nation as well as a country, most prominently in poetry.³⁸ The literary production was predominantly in the form of poetry and music which were still the more popular forms of Arabic literature, a preference which traces back to the oral traditions of Arab tribes. The Iraqi novel, which did not emerge until the 1940s, was a relatively new concept to the Iraqi literati, therefore the study of mid-century Iraqi literary themes must include poetry at least until the more common presence

³⁸ Zubaida, Sami. "Literary Glimpses of Modern Iraqi History and Society" from *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*. 407.

of Iraqi fiction in the 1960s. Iraqi writers such as Dhu al-Nun Ayyub Abd al-Wahid, Fu'ad al-Takarli, and Ali Badr began to produce the first novels which provided a suitable medium that enabled them to more thoroughly explore and express the complex social developments taking place in Iraq during that period.³⁹ The rest of this section will discuss the common themes found in 20th century Iraqi literature and how it simultaneously represented and encouraged national unity through literary themes. Additionally, this will examine the interaction between the literati and the government and how the Ba'ath Party eventually attempted to co-opt different themes to promote nationalism and patriotism.

There were many common topics that were addressed by Iraqi poets during the early to mid-century period. Early nationalist themes focused on issues and events that were unique to Iraq. Rural and urbanization problems, the British mandate in Iraq, the need to minimize the roles of British advisors, the 1920 revolt, and general frustration with inept administration of the country were addressed directly or indirectly by poets and songwriters from all different backgrounds. One such example is the poem "My Brother Jafar" by Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, which was written after he experienced the tragic death of his brother in his arms after being shot by police during the *al-Wathbah* uprising in Baghdad in January 1948. The uprising was in response to the Portsmouth Treaty that the Iraqi Prime Minister signed, renewing the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty from 1930 which allowed the unrestricted movement of British troops in Iraq and further denied Iraqi independence. This uprising emerged from resentment surrounding the poor living conditions experienced in the growing urban centers, the lack of opportunities for a growing educated population, and the inability of the government to address social issues.

³⁹ Ibid. 408 – 412.

The uprising was largely orchestrated by the ICP and was supported by Iraqis regardless of individual background because the issues were widespread across Iraq. Similarly drawing on events in contemporary Iraqi history, Fu'ad al-Takarli's *The Long Way Back* is a fictional account that centers on the Ba'athist coup of February 1963. The novel's protagonist, Midhat, personifies the social and financial instability of educated Iraqis during the turbulent years of the mid-century. Despite lacking political ambitions Midhat is negatively affected by the actions of the politically-motivated actions of others and is ultimately killed as a bystander during the conflict in the al-Akrad neighborhood of Baghdad between Communists and Ba'athists in the days following the coup.

Another aspect of al-Takarli's novel that reinforced Iraqi identity is the diglossia utilized by narrating the novel in standard *fusha* Arabic while the dialogues are written in colloquial Baghdadi Arabic⁴⁰ which supported the "imagination" of the Iraqi nation.⁴¹ In contrast to al-Takarli's use of a more generally understood dialect of Baghdadi-Iraqi Arabic, the poet Muzaffar al-Nawab wrote in the southern Iraqi dialect more common among Shia. However, this limited his audience and he switched to *fusha* in his later works which led to his works becoming much more popular. The use of Iraqi dialect became an increasingly political activity in the 1950s and 1960s because it promoted the Iraqi identity better than *fusha*, which was more commonly understood in other Arabic-speaking countries. Therefore, the intentional use of colloquial Arabic by artists such as Jawad Salim when he delivered lectures underscored his nationalism through his diglossia preference that did not necessarily align with Pan-Arabism's penchant for standard Arabic. Saddam Hussein capitalized on the use of colloquial Arabic by giving

⁴⁰ The colloquial Baghdadi-Iraqi Arabic is commonly understood throughout Iraq due to its central use in trade as well as being the more common dialect spoken in media (other than *fusha*).

⁴¹ Zubaida, "Literary Glimpses of Modern Iraqi History and Society." 408.

speeches, even to international audiences, in Iraqi dialect. More specifically, Saddam Hussein used the Baghdadi dialect in public events, which was different than the Tikriti dialect in which he naturally spoke.⁴² Baghdadi Arabic was accepted as the de facto national dialect, therefore it was equally sensible for the literati as it was for politicians to adopt its usage along with other conspicuous efforts to reinforce national identity.

The Iraqi literati used natural imagery unique to Iraq which helped to establish a collective nation based on geography. Mid-century poets utilized descriptions of the country side, prominent geographic features, Iraqi peasants, and the indigenous flora and fauna of Iraq to invoke a range of emotions from historic pride to mournful nostalgia for the homeland. Al-Jawahiri, known as “the Arabs’ greatest poet,” demonstrates this point in his portrayal of “Tigris the Benevolent”⁴³ which is described as the jewel of Baghdad, a relief for weary animals, and the vital water resource to the rural agrarian communities. Imagery of the Tigris is equally moving to the Kurdish communities in northern Iraq as it is to the Shias in the south and serves as a shared connection among all Iraqis. Other poets such as Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati also referenced the Tigris and Euphrates, riverbanks and seashores littered with shells, the palm trees and vines sprouting from the fertile Iraqi soil, as well as specific metropolitan features and landmarks that existed in Iraqi cities. Iraqi novelists such as Dhu al-Nun Ayyub Abd al-Wahid, al-Takarli and Ali Badr continued this trend, in Iraqi cities and neighborhoods rather than the countryside since it provided a more suitable setting to represent the heterogeneous mixture of the people and ideologies.

⁴² Mazraani, Nathalie. *Aspects of Language Variation in Arabic Political Speech-Making*. 99 – 105.

⁴³ Also translated as “Tigris the Donor of Welfare.”

In addition to the natural features that defined the Iraqi homeland, writers attempted to establish the uniqueness of Iraqi identity by engaging in the ancient history of their homeland. Iraqi literati had a seemingly endless amount of historical material to work with, such as Iraqi folklore and mythology, pre-Islamic history, Christian symbolism, and other traditions which were used in an effort to unify the demands for democracy and independence prior to 1958.⁴⁴ The interest in Mesopotamian history and culture for nationalist ideals was first discussed by Sati al-Husri in 1927 and continued to be increasingly influential to concepts of Iraqi identity during the twentieth century, eventually being adopted by the Ba'ath Party in the 1960s. The idea of a cultural link to the ancient Assyrian, Sumerian, Babylonian civilizations conveniently avoided the history of the Ottoman and (especially) Abbasid Empires which were known for the oppression of Shia, thus preventing divisive memories.⁴⁵ Sunni and Shia intellectuals, artists, and writers were nearly unanimous in their adoption of pre-Islamic imagery because it exalted the status of the Iraqi nation and established an identity that was distinct from other Arabs. The most famous 20th century Iraqi artist Jawad Salim rose to international acclaim for his works inspired by the art of its past civilizations that were used in a modernist 20th century expression.⁴⁶ Neoclassical poets like al-Jawahiri artfully integrated *jahili* themes in poems while modernist poets like Nazik al-Mala'ikah and al-Sayyab were more open in their works which prominently featured references to Iraqi folklore and Mesopotamian mythology.

⁴⁴ Musawi, Mushin. *Reading Iraq*. 115.

⁴⁵ Baram, Amatzia. "A Case of Imported Identity: The modernizing secular ruling elites of Iraq and the concept of Mesopotamian-inspired territorial nationalism, 1922 – 1992," 281-284.

⁴⁶ Bashkin, O. *The Other Iraq*. 131.

Poetry often decried the negative effects of British influence over the Iraqi governments by describing the poverty, hunger, and oppression of average Iraqis whose needs were not being met by the ruling elite. Fiction writers were able to more deliberately attack the ruling elite through their characterization in novels. Stories such as *Doctor Ibrahim*, often considered to be the first Iraqi novel, demonstrated the corrupting effects of foreign interference by describing the protagonist as a London University-educated man who returns to Baghdad and manipulates the period of political transition to obtain a lofty government position. He joins a variety of Muslim, Christian, nationalist, and communist organizations in an attempt to consolidate favor and power needed to achieve his desired post. The most impactful critique is the description of various officials as focused on personal interests while their political obligations are easily disregarded because there is no connection to the common people.⁴⁷ The underlying message against this individually focused behavior is that it made officials more pliable to British interests and thus created the much-despised puppet governments prior to 1958. Ali Badr's *Baba Sartre*, a surrealist novel set in 1960s Baghdad, similarly criticizes intellectuals by portraying the main character as a phony philosopher who fails his studies in Europe but returns home where he becomes known as the "Philosopher of Sadria" by quoting Jean-Paul Sartre though he fails to truly understand the concepts of existentialism.⁴⁸ Badr's opinion of the shallowness of Baghdadi intellectual culture was shared by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra who observed the failure of many Arab intellectuals to fully read or understand the works of Western philosophers such as Sartre or Marx.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Musawi, Mushin. *Reading Iraq*. p. 6.

⁴⁸ Zubaida, Sami. "Literary Glimpses of Modern Iraqi History and Society" 413-415.

⁴⁹ Jabra, Jabra Ibrahim. "Modern Arabic Literature and the West" *Journal of Arabic Literature* Vol. 2. 1971, 77-81.

One of the most common themes found in mid-century Iraqi poetry and fiction was the theme of mourning. The central theme of mourning that has become a distinctly Iraqi attribute in contemporary poetry and music can be attributed to the popularity of the Iraqi *maqam*, an urban music genre arranged according to the Arabo-Turkish modal system that originated over three hundred years ago, in the cities of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra.⁵⁰ The influence of the traditional *maqam* on Iraqi poetry⁵¹ was a natural transition due to the rich quality of verse written in either classical or colloquial Arabic. Themes of mourning often overlap with other common themes such as political oppression, love, exile, and rebellion but the emphasis on sorrow is a uniquely Iraqi trait. Al-Sayyab's most famous poem "Hymn of the Rain"⁵² is an excellent example of overlapping the theme of mourning with Iraqi geography and ancient history. In this poem he contrasts the shells and pearls that come from the gulf to the deaths of fishermen and immigrants in the same waters, praises the green grasses, fruitful vineyard, and colorful flowers nurtured by the Euphrates but emphasizes that "not a year passed that Iraq has not suffered [from] starvation."⁵³ Despite highlighting the benefits of the water, the repetitive reference to rain, storm clouds, and untimely deaths creates a consistent sorrowful tone. Al-Sayyab adds references to pre-Islamic civilizations to accompany the mood "and the amassing of lightning in the mountains and plains...the winds of Thamud would not have left their effects in the valley."⁵⁴ Here the homeland's terrain features are used with reference to the Thamud, a pre-Islamic Arabian tribe mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions as well as the

⁵⁰ Abu-Haidar, Farida. "The Poetic Content of the Iraqi "Maqām"." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 19, no. 2 (1988): 128-129.

⁵¹ Abu-Haidar further illuminates this connection by specifically exploring the *maqam* sub-genre of poetry.

⁵² Also commonly translated as "The Rain Song".

⁵³ This is an inference to the inept nature of the series of Iraqi rulers which he opposed for various reasons. Author's translation.

⁵⁴ Author's translation.

Quran in a way that ties Iraqi history, geography, and sorrow together in a very powerful poem. The melancholic overtones were also extant in novels, which often involved tragic events that depicted the main characters, or at least common Iraqis, as victims of other forces beyond their control. It is certainly no coincidence that the production of mournful themes in Iraqi literature increased during a period that political ideologies trended more to the left.

Many of the popular themes that emerged in Iraqi literature during the turbulent mid-century period of Iraq emphasized the idea of the Iraqi nation. The traditional identities such as tribe, ethnicity, and sect gradually declined during the 1920s as people began to accept the permanent nature of the new nation-state. Traditional concepts of identity were replaced with personal political and ideological identities within the generations that emerged during the 1930s through the 1970s. This was especially true in the urban areas such as Baghdad where mixed neighborhoods grew during a period of rapid urbanization.⁵⁵ The Iraqi literati were able to capture the general atmosphere of national unity during this period in poetry, novels, and songs by accentuating themes that were not bound by ethno-sectarian backgrounds. Themes of mourning, nationalism, geographic homeland, and anti-colonialism naturally appeared in the literature because it reflected the mood of the nation. Other themes such as the use of Mesopotamian symbolism, Iraqi folklore, and colloquial language on the other hand were often more deliberately employed for the purpose of provoking thoughts of national unity. Regardless of the organic nature of the literary themes it is clear that they were very influential in promoting a sense of national identity.

⁵⁵ 35% of the population lived in urban areas in 1947 but increased to 65% by 1977, According to Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, "The Historiography of Modern Iraq" *American Historical Review* Vol. 96, no. 5, 1991, 1412.

The effectiveness of such themes is evidenced by the co-opting of these ideas by the Ba'ath Party after it came to power in 1968. Saddam Hussein was particularly effective at using writers to produce propaganda material that adeptly employed some of these themes and promoted brands of nationalism and patriotism that were loyal to his authoritarian regime. Noticeably absent from the literature produced inside Iraq during the Saddam regime is the theme of sorrow which was more commonly found in the works published by writers in exile. Intense censorship on the press by the Ba'ath Party prevented criticism of the regime as well as the mourning of the lives lost during the Iran-Iraq War or First Gulf War because it was assumed that such themes would diminish support for the war. However, some veiled criticisms were able to escape the government censors through the crafty use of vagueness and symbolism. Instead of mourning for the deceased, the soldiers and civilians were celebrated in patriotic literature as martyrs to the noble cause of Iraq. This partly explains the presence of these past wars in modern Iraqi literature because much of the suffering and mourning that occurred during the wars and sanctions were not allowed to be freely expressed by those who experienced it.

The Baathification of Iraqi culture was a methodical use of literary themes in the “war literature genre” which was promoted through literary competitions and prizes to celebrate the literature of loyal writers in support of the wars and the Ba'ath party. Poets such as Abd al-Razzaq Abd al-Wahid were praised and rewarded for their nationalist themes. One such poem, *Watan*, describes the shape of palm trees during different Iraqi seasons which leads him to “[see] the glory of Iraq/ I came to realize why/ the blood of a thousand martyrs/ is spilled for palm fronds”⁵⁶ The Ba'ath Party also utilized the Mesopotamian theme as an effective means to manipulate public opinion by controlling

⁵⁶ Author's translation.

the national discourse. Mesopotamian imagery was intended to provide a secular basis for mutual identity, united ethno-sectarian tensions, legitimized Saddam's place among great Iraqi rulers, distinguished Iraqi uniqueness from other Arabs, and instill a sense of historic-based national pride.⁵⁷ Saddam also attempted to make use of religious symbolism by referring to the war with Iran as *Qadisiyyat Saddam*, referring to the battle of *al-Qadisiyyah* fought between the Persian Sasanian Empire and the Arab Muslim army of the Rashidun Caliphate. This was a useful propaganda tool because "authority has an enormous interest in manipulating, forging, and accentuating religion, rituals, and history. These are means to legitimacy in the absence of transparent constitutional process."⁵⁸ Unfortunately for Saddam he did not enjoy successes as the Caliph Umar did. Instead he continued to promote the unifying themes of nationalism that were established by the mid-century literati and continued to use them for the purpose of social engineering and consolidating his power until the overthrow of his regime in 2003.

Textual Analysis of the Literary Response to the US Occupation of Iraq

Hassan Blasim

Hassam Blasim is an Iraqi poet, filmmaker, and writer born in Baghdad in 1973 to a Shiite family. He grew up in Kirkuk where his father served in the military until he died of a stroke when Blasim was sixteen. Blasim returned to Baghdad to study film at Baghdad's Academy of Cinematic Arts. In 1998 he moved from the capital to Sulaymaniyah in the Iraqi Kurdistan region in order to produce films critical of the Saddam regime. He fled the country in 2000, travelling as an illegal migrant for nearly four years until he finally settled in Finland. He writes in Arabic but has experienced

⁵⁷ Baram, Amatzia. *Culture, History, and Ideology In the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968-89*. 136 – 138.

⁵⁸ Musawi, Mushin. *Reading Iraq*. p. 46.

more success publishing translated versions of his works, largely with the help of three PEN grants to publish his short stories into English collections. Blasim published *The Madman of Freedom Square* in English in 2009 three years prior to publishing it in Arabic. Even after extensive censorship of *The Madman of Freedom Square* by a Lebanese publisher, the short story collection was still banned by several Arab countries. The struggle with censorship is largely due to Blasim's use of foul language and his portrayal of taboo topics such as alcohol consumption and sexual assault that are forbidden from being published in printed fiction despite their common occurrence in reality.⁵⁹ In order to avoid censorship and make his works available to Arab audiences Blasim has shared most of his poems and stories online in Arabic. His stories have been well received in Iraq as well as in the international community and he has even been referred to as "perhaps the best writer of Arabic fiction alive."⁶⁰

Hassan Blasim's stories are influenced by his personal experiences as a child during the Iran-Iraq War when he witnessed domestic violence, public executions, and the tense atmosphere during the Kurdish resistance to the Saddam regime.⁶¹ His portrayal of violence is not limited to just the recent conflicts in Iraq. His stories take place over the last half century, with each period equally reflecting a Kafkaesque nightmare which defines his own experience and perception of his homeland. Regardless of whether his stories occur in the past, present, or future, they all contain elements of individual or group violence and the sordid irrational behavior of characters regardless of affiliation or

⁵⁹ Holland, Jessica. "A Nightmare of Violence and Terror" May 1, 2014. <https://www.guernicamag.com/a-nightmare-of-violence-and-terror/>.

⁶⁰ Yassin-Kassab, Robin. "Review *Beirut 39: New Writing from the Arab World*" June 11, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/12/beirut-new-writing-arab-world>.

⁶¹ Holland, J. "A Nightmare of Violence and Terror" <https://www.guernicamag.com/a-nightmare-of-violence-and-terror>.

identity. Whether the violence occurs during the Saddam regime or during the US occupation is only a minor detail for Blasim, because violence in Iraq “has been practiced over the past 50 years with severity and savagery; it has been a chain of painful and peculiar nightmares” so the perpetrators of violence are not limited to simply one archetypal character.⁶² Blasim is equally critical of all parties that have played a role in the destruction of Iraqi’s physical infrastructure as well as tearing apart the nation’s social fabric. The presence of the US military typically in his stories is used as a sort of background to introduce an atmosphere of fear and tension while at other times US soldiers are just one of many contributors to the violence.

While the culpability of the US government is obvious to Blasim’s readers, American forces are more often represented as naive participants who predictably overreact to situations. Despite being the most powerful and lethal element in the story Americans working in Iraq remain aloof about the realities of the Iraqi society. Blasim saves his harshest critique for Iraqi leaders; politicians, extremist organization leaders, and religious zealots. Iraqis are criticized more directly because they intentionally manipulate the situation to their own personal benefit and at the expense of their country’s future. Leaders are described by Blasim as hypocrites who will gladly sell out their people and homeland in exchange for personal power or financial benefit.

Hassan Blasim reflects on the cycle of constant warfare and suffering with a surprising casual tone. Simple explanations are used to convey significant plot developments such as “one summer evening we were invaded again.”⁶³ Blasim also

⁶² Dorkofikis, Tasja. “Hassan Blasim – online interview” May 22, 2014. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/hassan-blasim-online-interview-9417404.html>.

⁶³ Blasim, Hassan. *The Iraqi Christ*. London: Comma Press. 2013. 10.

captures the dark humor common among Baghdad's population that is collectively dealing with post-traumatic stress. Characters such as a waiter who jocularly renames menu items with adjectives such as "explosive kebabs," "fragmentary stew," and "ballistic rice," appear at ease with violent morbid topics.⁶⁴ Blasim re-introduces his Iraqi audience to the 'culture of mourning' that became popular in mid-twentieth century Iraq but declined under the Ba'athist censors. However, like other Iraqi writers he emphasizes the suffering through his skillful use of the grotesque by blurring the lines between reality and fantasy in a way that elicits both empathy and disgust. This a growing trend among Iraqi writers because it is a unifying theme with which most Iraqis can relate.

Another common trend in Blasim's work and that of his peers is the daily interaction between Iraq's heterogeneous population, particularly the inclusion of Christian Iraqi characters in his stories. Today it is estimated that less than 300,000 Christians remain in Iraq, a fraction of the estimated 1.5 to 1.8 million in 2003.⁶⁵ Despite Christians making up less than one percent of the current population and only as high as four percent of the pre-occupation population total, they are represented in a large number of modern Iraqi novels and short stories. It is not by accident that authors who condemn the rise of sectarianism and religious fundamentalism would emphasize the inter-sectarian cooperation and write about the unifying nature of suffering among all Iraqis.

The Madman of Freedom Square

"The Reality and the Record" begins Blasim's first collection *The Madman of Freedom Square*, published in English in 2009, with a story recounted by an Iraqi

⁶⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁵ Estimates of the Christian population vary due to lack of census data. Data based on several sources including Iraqi Christian Human Rights Council, Media, and US Intelligence estimates.

ambulance driver seeking asylum at a refugee center in Sweden. He describes responding to a murder scene in the winter of 2006 where six decapitated clerics were left in the street. As he returns to the hospital with the six heads in an empty sack he is beaten and kidnapped by a group of armed men as he crosses the Martyr's Bridge in Baghdad. The men force him to dress in an Iraqi military uniform and make a video recording in which he must claim to be an Iraqi officer who raided homes and tortured innocent civilians under the order of a senior US Army officer. Despite the fallacious nature of the story, the video is "authenticated" by Al-Jazeera and aired around the world. The success of the video being accepted by the media results in the ambulance driver being sold to a second group called the 'Islamic Jihad Group, Iraqi Branch' who force him to make a new video claiming to be a member of the Mehdi Army receiving support from Iran to murder hundreds of Sunni men. He is then bought and sold by a series of armed groups who make propaganda videos in which he variously claims to be "a treacherous Kurd, an infidel Christian, a Saudi terrorist, a Syrian Baathist intelligence agent, or a Revolutionary Guard."⁶⁶ Each new video is then broadcast around the world while "experts, journalists, and politicians sat there discussing what I said and did" without once considering the veracity of his claims.⁶⁷ The claims become increasingly ridiculous until he eventually announces himself as "the new leader of the al Qaida organization in Mesopotamia and made threats against everyone in creation"⁶⁸ in his final recording.

Despite being bought and sold by his captors and taken to different locations, he is aware that he never leaves Baghdad. Each time the narrator is sold to a new group and taken to a new hideout he is transported over the Martyr's Bridge. The Martyr's Bridge

⁶⁶ Blasim, Hassan. *The Madman of Freedom Square*. 10.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

plays a central role throughout the story because it crosses the Tigris River between eastern and western Baghdad. Following the forced relocation of Baghdadi residents in mixed neighborhoods in 2006, the east side of the Tigris was generally recognized as a Shia dominated area while the Sunnis were concentrated on the west side of the city.⁶⁹ The fact that he is transported across the bridge illustrates that the opposing sectarian groups are actually working together by trading their prisoner. The ambulance driver expresses his annoyance at the senseless futility of his captivity. His recorded claims and demands become more outlandish each time but his statements are still accepted as truth by the media who continue to report on the sectarian violence despite the fact that the groups are actually working together. What is most noticeable in the story is that throughout his experience in captivity the cameraman remains the same, despite working for conflicting groups. The narrator is even convinced that the cameraman is actually his trusted supervisor from the hospital. These details reveal the deceptive and pragmatic nature of the local militias vying for power in 2006. Blasim shows that the ideologies the respective groups claim to represent are just a shallow façade for their true goals of increasing organizational and individual authority during the chaos of post-Saddam Iraq. The gullibility of the Western media plays perfectly into the political ambitions of the militias by uncritically accepting the videos at face value and further stoking the sectarian tensions.

⁶⁹ Damluji, Mona. "Securing Democracy in Iraq: Sectarian Politics and Segregation in Baghdad, 2003-2007." *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 21, no. 2 (2010): 71-87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41758725>. Hagan, John, Joshua Kaiser, Anna Hanson, and Patricia Parker. "Neighborhood Sectarian Displacement and the Battle for Baghdad: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Fear and Crimes Against Humanity in Iraq." *Sociological Forum* 30, no. 3 (2015): 675-97.

The Iraqi Christ

The Iraqi Christ is a collection of fourteen short stories originally written and published on the internet by the in author in 2013 with assistance from the English PEN's Writer's in Translation Program. Hassan Blasim establishes the role of the US military in most of his stories as an omnipresent character that is portrayed as simply part of the story's setting like an unmovable force of nature that explains circumstances such as power outages, concrete barriers, general public fear, or as a backstory to explain routine criminal activity. In other stories such as "The Song of the Goats" the US Military is like a gullible character easily manipulated by the political and security forces to unwittingly fulfil personal vendettas, such as the teacher who reports his neighbor to the police for trading in stolen antiquities from the National Museum, only to be betrayed by the police who reported the teacher's house "as an al-Qaeda hideout. The police were in partnership with the smuggler. The Ministry of Defense sent the report to the US Army, who bombed the teacher's house by helicopter."⁷⁰ Perpetual military presence and the atmosphere of living in an unending state of warfare is a common theme in modern Iraqi fiction. Prior to the US occupation any story taking place during the Era of the Saddam Regime almost by default occurs during the Iran-Iraq War, the first Gulf War, or during the period of crippling economic sanctions.

Stories taking place prior to 2003 still describe life in the general public as "the streets were full of military police and all the security agencies"⁷¹ except they were Baathists maintaining order and searching for deserters. The US military simply adopted this role in stories occurring after 2003 by manning security checkpoints and patrolling

⁷⁰ Blasim, Hassan. *The Iraqi Christ*. 2.

⁷¹ Ibid. 9.

the streets, with the exception that the US is less informed and therefore relies on the local authorities for actionable targets. Hassan Blasim's criticism of the gullibility of the US extends beyond military or political entities to other forms of perceived foreign interventionists. In "Sarsara's Tree" the protagonist works "for a local NGO that intends to rip off a foreign NGO that issues grants. My task is to exaggerate the truth. To paint a bleak picture of the many villages that lie scattered along the banks of the River Nabi."⁷² Yet there is a sense of self-interested nihilism in the story because the river sits on the border with an unnamed neighbor with whom "we've been fighting ruinous wars...since the dawn of history" and the protagonist is aware that his false report will potentially contribute to a renewed conflict with this unspecified historic enemy (presumably Iran) by exaggerating the availability of future water resources along the shared border.

Hassan Blasim touches on sectarianism in several of his short stories. In "The Iraqi Christ" a Christian Iraqi Soldier, Daniel, is serving as a medic during the First Gulf War who appears to possess an inexplicable premonitory ability to avoid being killed. Many of his companions came to appreciate his mystical ability and felt that their survival was attributed to his ability. When Daniel walked away from the relative safety of the trench to lie down next to a water tank, his companions followed, "jostling to keep close to him as if he were a shield against missiles"⁷³ The Muslim Soldiers who doubted Daniel's ability because he was Christian, pejoratively nicknaming him 'Chewgum Christ', were ultimately killed in the war, victims of their own sectarian-based ignorance. While this demonstrates the existence of sectarian views among the Iraqis during the First Gulf War, it is important to note that this sectarianism is represented in a non-violent,

⁷² Ibid. 101.

⁷³ Ibid. 28.

non-confrontational way. The protagonist further points out the foolishness of Daniel's detractors by describing them as ignorant monkeys whose views led to their own demise. Daniel returns home after the war and lives long enough to see his premonitions of a collapsing world come to reality. He remains in Iraq to care for his mother after most of his family flees "one by one, driven away by wars and the madness of sectarian fanaticism" and is ultimately killed when he is forced to become a suicide bomber in exchange for his mother's life. Hassan Blasim's story of Daniel demonstrates the presence of anti-Christian views among Iraqi hoi polloi and its imprudent nature and characterizes the unravelling of Iraqi's heterogeneous society into sectarian violence as senselessly self-destructive inanity.

"The Green Zone Rabbit" is the most direct criticism against inter-sectarian violence that consumed Iraq during the US occupation. The protagonist, Hajjar, is a fighter for a sectarian militia who was recruited by his uncle to take revenge against another sectarian militia that killed his brothers. He is told to wait for his revenge operation in a hotel with another fighter, Salsal, who spends much of his time discussing politics and religion on social media with writers, journalists and intellectuals. Salsal has an irritable temperament towards people in general with the exception of a deputy minister for whom he connects with online and holds in high regard because of his intellect and character. He even expresses suspicion for his own militia because "in the world of sectarian and political assassinations, people were often betrayed because of greater interests...over political positions or to cover up some large-scale corruption"⁷⁴ Eventually Salsal and Hajjar are given a vehicle, two pistols, and a location for their mission. The deputy minister is the target. However, at the last moment the deputy

⁷⁴ Ibid. 41.

minister sends Salsal a message that reveals he is aware of the assassination plot. “I got out of the car, my blood boiling at Salsal’s stupidity and all the craziness of this pathetic operation.” Realizing the pair of would-be assassins has been sold out to their “enemy” Hajjar attempts to contact their controller and their car explodes.

The main characters have fallen victim to the betrayal and corruption that defined the nascent Iraqi political environment after the fall of the Saddam regime. Hassan Blasim highlights the complex nature of the shifting political allegiances in Iraq during the US occupation. Despite the claims by sectarian militias to represent and fight for the defense of Iraqis based on identity politics, the extremists were really focused on maximizing authority and power. The religious zealotry was little more than a recruiting effort in order to achieve personal political gain for the militia leaders. The protagonist, Hajjar, is motivated to join a sectarian militia in order to avenge the deaths of his brothers but he and his partner are simply pawns in a larger game. Despite their belief in the sectarian militia’s declared mission, they are readily sacrificed by their leadership in a deliberate attempt to garner future political leverage.

Hassan Blasim does not single out any specific group of people in his works, but rather takes more of a scorched earth approach in his criticism of all the parties who were guilty in the destruction of his homeland. The morally corrupt politicians who sell out their own country and people in exchange for money and power are equally to blame for deteriorating conditions as are the sectarian militias that cunningly use identity politics to secure popular support. The shortsighted focus on power through sectarian politics is pursued at the expense of peace and stability in Iraq. The US also plays an important role in Blasim’s works, but he does not allow them to dominate the story or become the

strawman or scapegoat for his country's ills. The US forces are almost disregarded as a central actor, merely playing a peripheral role during the Gulf War, enforcing no-fly zones during the sanctions period, and during the occupation which serves to describe the setting. Occupation forces are only portrayed in an active role in Blasim's stories through their oblivious and imprudent actions that come from far off like an uncontrollable, random force of nature.

Sinan Antoon

Sinan Antoon is a novelist, poet, translator, and scholar who was born to an Iraqi father and American mother and raised in Baghdad. He graduated with a B.A. in English from Baghdad University in 1990. Following the First Gulf War he migrated with his family to the United States where he studied Arabic Literature at Georgetown and Harvard. He published his first novel in 2004, describing a life of constant fear for Iraqi intellectuals and experiences of prison and torture on political dissidents during the Saddam regime. His second novel, published in Arabic as *The Pomegranate Alone*, was published in 2010 and translated to English in 2013 as *The Corpse Washer*. Sinan Antoon's three most recent novels *The Corpse Washer*, *The Baghdad Eucharist*, and *The Book of Collateral Damage* are all literary responses to the US occupation and ensuing civil war in Iraq. Each of his novels has been translated into numerous languages and has been nominated for various literary prizes, including the Arab Booker, and the Independent International Fiction Prize (the same year Hassan Blasim won it for *The Iraqi Christ*).

Despite his exilic experience as an intellectual living in the country that invaded his homeland, Sinan Antoon remains relevant to the social currents in Iraq. He has

returned to Iraq several times since 2003 and produced a documentary, written articles, poetry, and novels that reflect his experiences. In addition to the international critical acclaim, Antoon's Arabic novels have been well received by readers in Iraq. His novels focus on how the US invasion and occupation changed the country by showing the impacts on average middle-class Iraqis from different parts of a diverse population. *The Corpse Washer* protagonist is a Shia, *The Baghdad Eucharist* tells the contemporary history of Iraq through the perspective of two different generations of Iraqi Christians, and *The Book of Collateral Damage* is a work of autobiographical fiction about an American-Iraqi intellectual witnessing the US occupation from abroad. In each of Sinan Antoon's novels he criticizes policies of the US military or government by demonstrating how these decisions impact Iraqi citizens. The American presence remains in the periphery of his stories, rarely engaging directly with his characters, though their omnipresent existence is felt through their effects on the Iraqis at both the collective and individual level. The loss of life and the psychological impact of fear is the means through which the occupation forces typically engage at the individual level. While the political effects tear at the seams of the Iraqi social fabric, changing the composition of the Iraqi public into a violent and unrecognizable version of itself. The focus for Sinan Antoon is not simply to argue against decisions by US policymakers or actions by the US military but rather to show how they take a toll on Iraqis at the individual and social levels. His criticism is not so much against any one thing, but rather in support of Iraqi citizens. Sinan Antoon was praised by *Al-Ahram Weekly* as "fast becoming not only the voice of the disaffections of modern Iraq, but also one of the most acclaimed authors of the Arab world. In recent articles Sinan Antoon continues to point out the corruption and

failings of the government under the direction of Iranian influence. The Iraqi government's violent response to protests in Baghdad and Basra, and the restriction of internet services due to the protests have been strongly criticized by Sinan Antoon. Sinan Antoon sees himself as a voice for his homeland and this loyalty to the people is not bound by politics or identity.

The Corpse Washer

The Corpse Washer is the story of Jawad, who comes of age during the Iran-Iraq War and the ensuing economic sanctions during the 1990s. Through Jawad's perspective, Sinan Antoon describes the transformation of the collective Iraqi conscience during the Saddam regime. The stories feature families attempting to recover from the high number of casualties and material losses during the Iran-Iraq War and the First Gulf War, then surviving the sanctions that crippled the economy, and then searching for a resolution to, or the meaning of, the violent civil war endured during the US occupation. Jawad is the younger son of one of the few Shi'i corpse washers in Baghdad who cleanses and prepares dead bodies for burial. His brother, the favored prodigal son, was killed during the Iran-Iraq War after completing medical school. Meanwhile Jawad, an aspiring artist, disappoints his father by not following in his footsteps. Ultimately the death of his father, lack of work opportunities as a painter, and the large number of daily killings force Jawad to abandon his artistic ambitions and take over the family business to perform his communal-religious duty.

Role of the US. The protagonist's criticism of the US is indirect and based on the negative impacts military and political actions are having on Iraqi people; his criticism is not a based on politics or a particular philosophy. While serving out his time in

conscripted service, Jawad is assigned to an Air Defense Battery near the No Fly Zone in southern Iraq during the tense standoff between the US and Iraq after the First Gulf War. “The no fly zone was supposed to prevent the regime from oppressing citizens, but these fighter jets would kill innocent herders. I never knew whether it was out of sheer idiocy, or whether it was a game, using Iraqis for target practice.”⁷⁵ Jawad’s father dies of a heart attack while saying his morning prayers during the initial “shock and awe” aerial bombardment. His death is not the direct result of an American missile or bullet, but the responsible role of the US is still clear. The indirect, yet clearly culpable, role of the American military is a common trend in most modern Iraqi fiction. Descriptions of checkpoints, soldiers, and convoys in the background help to set the scene that is relatable to most Iraqis, but more importantly it prevents American characters from playing any central role in the stories. This is an intentional method that tells the Iraqi perspective and contrasts with the preponderance of stories published about the invasion, more often told from the western perspective.

The only direct interaction between Antoon’s characters and Americans occurs while Jawad and some family members attempt to transport his deceased father to Najaf. The family is stopped by a convoy during the trip to Najaf. Jawad attempts to cooperate with American soldiers who, having no interpreter, rely on shouting and pointing rifles to communicate their commands. After a tense moment and a thorough search of Jawad’s family and his father’s coffin at gunpoint, the American convoy continues on its route towards Baghdad. Meanwhile the family is left with the impression that “these liberators want to humiliate us.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Antoon, Sinan. *The Corpse Washer*. p. 59.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

Much of the criticism against the US in *The Corpse Washer* comes from Jawad's uncle Sabri, who returns to Iraq in the summer of 2003 after being forced into exile for more than two decades by the Ba'ath Party for being a Communist Party member. The fall of the regime enables Sabri to return to Baghdad to console Jawad after the death of his father and to assess the political climate of Iraq during the first months of the US occupation. Writing in 2010 with hindsight, Antoon uses Sabri as a prophetic intellectual character who accurately forewarns of the political and social problems that eventually transpired after the US invasion. Much of Antoon's criticism is portrayed through Sabri's anger and frustration in response to questionable military actions that seem to contradict stated US policy goals. Much of this is due to the inattentiveness of American military units who fail to recognize the neo-colonial appearance of their actions. Rather than liberators, US occupation forces were seen as a contemporary version of the British mandate. Uncle Sabri becomes upset at the decline of Iraqi public life and the appearance of Baghdad in the first months of the occupation "Look at it now...garbage, dust, barbed wires, and tanks ... These Americans, with their ignorance and racism, will make people long for Saddam days."⁷⁷

The nature of the insensitive absentmindedness of the occupation forces is most conspicuously described when Jawad and Sabri visit the Martyr's Monument which had been built to honor the Iraqi soldiers killed during the Iran-Iraq War. The US Army had converted this into a barracks and motor pool. In reality this was likely done because of the monument's strategic location in Baghdad, and it also provided enough space required to store hundreds of armored vehicles. Therein lies the disconnect; this convenient logistical solution for a US Army brigade was considered deeply offensive by

⁷⁷ Ibid., 96.

many Iraqi civilians whose family members' names were inscribed on the walls inside of the monument.⁷⁸ Unfortunately many of the soldiers who considered themselves moral liberators likely never comprehended the tragic irony that the same conduct they considered strategically justifiable and militarily expedient could also be offensive and insulting to the population they had so recently liberated. Although many choices such as this were simple errors of judgement made by tactical commanders and mid-level decision makers, taken in aggregate, they were seen as part of a larger conspiracy to erase Iraqi national history and embarrass the citizenry in order to more effectively control and manipulate them.

In addition to pointing out aloof tactical decisions made at the local level, Antoon uses Uncle Sabri to criticize the political decisions made by the US and the embryonic Iraqi government at the national level too. Most notably, Sabri reacts to the political outcomes and elections with disbelief over the cognitive dissonance of Americans and their role in modern Iraqi history. The rise of the al-Da'wa Party within the American-made Iraqi Transitional Government would have seemed unlikely during the decades that the Da'wa Party was known for supporting the Islamic Revolution in Iran, terrorist attacks against the US in the Middle East, and especially for its close political ties to the Iranian Government. The real reason for the rise of the al-Da'wa party was largely due to its participation in the Iraqi National Congress during the 1990s, but it still seemed unlikely that a party whose objectives ran counter in many ways to the stated US mission would flourish in a system under American supervision. "Who would've ever believed that Iraq's prime minister would be from the Da'wa Party, spearheading a backward sectarian list? When I left Iraq, the Da'wa Party was banned and later the Americans

⁷⁸ Antoon, Sinan. "Monumental Disrespect" *Middle East Report* No. 228. 2003. 28-30.

placed it on the list of terrorist organizations. Now Bush shakes hands with al-Ja'fari? It's a bizarre world."⁷⁹

Critiques of sectarianism emerging after the invasion. Uncle Sabri, an ardent Communist during the 1970s, was forced into exile when the Baathists began executing Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) members under charges of treason. After his return, Sabri speaks to political activists in the streets and discovers that communism as a political ideology was in decline. The decline in popularity was largely due to the Saddam Regime's anti-communist programs, but also the ICP's participation in the new Iraqi government caused a split within the party because participation legitimized the CPA. Despite the internal split, many are confident that sectarian parties will not succeed in the new government because the attempts of sectarian politics had failed throughout Iraq and the Middle East in the twentieth century. Many considered the sectarian movement in Iraq as merely a temporary trend that would soon pass because "the history of sectarianism in Iraq was well known, and that religious parties had no solutions to offer, just obscurantism. Islamic movements had failed anyway in the Arab world." Despite the optimism, the truth was that the sectarian ideology flourished compared to other political movements because they had a more established infrastructure and support system. The Ba'ath Party eliminated all potential competition so there was no existing system of organized political parties, and development of political movements was initially slow and chaotic. Uncle Sabri again expresses prophetic concerns because of two coexisting conditions; the pessimism of the intellectuals remaining outside the rebuilding efforts and the presence of others willing to capitalize on the moment. "The void created by the occupation was being filled with these sectarian parties because they had institutions.

⁷⁹ Antoon, Sinan. *The Corpse Washer*. 98.

Their rhetoric touched people's hearts and they knew how to exploit the political climate."⁸⁰

Once the formation of the government council under Paul Bremer was announced, Jawad expresses confusion toward the "hodgepodge of names supposedly representing the spectrum of Iraqi society, but we had never heard of most of them. What they had in common was that each name was preceded by its sect: Sunni, Shia, Christian... We were not accustomed to such a thing." Jawad's unfamiliarity with the names refers to the fact that many of the leaders who participated in the formation of the post-Saddam Iraqi government were former exiles who had returned to their homeland in order to take part in the rebuilding of their homeland. However, many of these politicians were viewed as outsiders who only returned for personal gain. Jawad notes that the sectarian identity was a new phenomenon in Iraqi politics because previously leaders and activists were known for their political philosophies and ideologies. Sectarian identity was not previously emphasized because it was not as important as the ideas they represented. Uncle Sabri's reaction was more intense because the secretary general of the Iraqi Communist Party had chosen to participate in the council. "Look at him for God's sake. They put him there as a Shiite, and not because he represents an ideological trend or a party with its own history of political struggle."⁸¹ His furious response can be attributed to the fact that his pessimistic outlook was coming true and his party leaders had seemingly forfeited their political identity as Communists in exchange for a sectarian identity which bequeathed them with more political power. This simply reflected reality between 2003 and 2006, which saw the increase of sectarian identity politics. As more political

⁸⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁸¹ Ibid., 91-92.

demonstrations took place, the support for political and ideological movements was replaced “with religious and sectarian symbols. The sectarian stamp became normal and began to acquire unusual impact. In time the Communist Party’s popularity dwindled, and its performance in elections was dismal; its secularism meant that it would be the last horse in the sectarian race. No one would place bets on it.”⁸²

Following the spread of sectarian violence that broke out on the heels of the bombing of the al-Askari mosque in February 2006, “the satellite channels were buzzing with noise and sectarian frenzy on both sides. They hosted many turbaned men, most of whom were experienced in fanning the flames of hatred and rousing other zealots of their sects, especially masked ones, to translate what was being said with their weapons and eloquent daggers.”⁸³ Like we see with other Iraqi authors, the representation of bogus sectarian inflation is often the “turbaned men” using religion to spread messages of hate. Many Iraqis succumbed to the sectarian rhetoric, but many intellectuals tried to counter this narrative. Jawad attempts to point out the deceit behind this false dichotomy regarding recent Sunni and Shia history. When a relative claimed “that Shiites had not ruled for fourteen hundred years, and that Saddam’s regime had been Sunni,” she is reminded “that the Americans had made a deck of cards with pictures of the most-wanted officials from the previous regime, and that the number of Shiites in the deck was larger than the number of Sunnis.”⁸⁴ Ultimately, personal opinions about the veracity of the sectarian rift no longer mattered because the assassinations, forced movement of families, and indiscriminant killings spoke louder than the voices of reason; the sectarian violence forced itself into becoming the de facto truth. Jawad describes the sectarian schism as a

⁸² Ibid., 94.

⁸³ Ibid., 134.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 148

stream that used to be easily crossed, but is now became a river “filled with blood, and whoever tried to cross, drowned. The images of those on the other side of the river had been inflated and disfigured. And out of these rivers came creatures which were extinct, or so we had thought. Old myths returned to cover the sun with their darkness and crush it to pieces. Now each sect or group had a sun, moon, and world of its own. Concrete walls rose to seal the tragedy.”⁸⁵

The Corpse Washer represents two of the main points that this paper attempts to prove. First, the representation of the US policies and military actions as poorly conceived ideas that rarely take into account the public perception of their actions. The conversion of a sacrosanct war memorial was an expedient tactical decision by military commanders who disregarded the importance of honoring the members of an Army which they had recently defeated. The US military did not consider how important the memorial was to the families whose sons were honored on the interior walls. Such actions appeared to strongly counter the stated goals to “win hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people. When this was combined with other actions such as rewriting history curricula in Iraqi public schools, it appeared that these were all parts of a concerted effort to erase or change modern Iraqi history.⁸⁶ Secondly, Sinan Antoon points out the emphasis of sectarian politics as a foreign conception. Early attempts of organic sectarian-based political movements failed after the decolonization of Iraq because so many competing ideologies and philosophies were more influential to individual political identity. However, almost half a century later it suddenly became a point of emphasis under Paul Bremmer. The chronology of the book also points out that the establishment

⁸⁵ Ibid., 149.

⁸⁶ Franzen, Johan. “Writing the History of Iraq: The fallacy of ‘objective’ history” *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*. 31-39.

of the new government council along sectarian lines during the 2005 Iraqi Transitional Government predated the spread of sectarian violence, which boiled over following the Askari attack in February 2006.

The Baghdad Eucharist

Sinan Antoon wrote and published *The Baghdad Eucharist* in Arabic in 2012 as *Ya Miriam* (meaning *Ave Maria*) about an Iraqi Christian family living in Baghdad during the US occupation. The novel, which was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, takes place over the course of about twenty-four hours on October 31, 2010. This was the day the Islamic State of Iraq, then considered just a small emerging splinter group of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, attacked a Syriac Christian church known as The Church of Our Lady of Salvation resulting in 58 killed and 78 wounded during Sunday Mass. The novel is told from the perspectives of two different characters as they each progress through a seemingly ordinary day with frequent flashbacks in their memories. The night before the fateful day Youssef, a Chaldean Christian in his 70s, gets into an argument with his Syriac niece, Maha, about the status of Christians in modern Iraq.

Sectarian Conflict from the Iraqi Christian Perspective. The crux of the argument centers on his optimism about the future of Iraq and the security of Christians despite the increased threats and targeted violence while Maha is more desperate to escape to a new life in Canada. Youssef's hopefulness originates from his fond memories before the decades of war, economic stagnation, and authoritarian rule under Saddam. However, Maha is a much younger, recently married college student who only remembers two decades of hardship. She does not have any halcyon days to reflect upon

and she becomes captivated by the constant state of violence which has shaped her upbringing.

Youssef has lived through many years of turmoil and political change in his lifetime. One of his closest childhood friends, from a Jewish family, was forced to migrate along with other Arab Jews during the period of forced migration to Israel after 1948.⁸⁷ He lived through the British-appointed monarchy, the subsequent coup and political jockeying for power in the 1950s and 60s. Despite the intense competition playing out in the Iraqi government, he still has fond memories of love and friendship that crossed religious barriers. Youssef's entire life was defined by the heterogeneous composition of the mixed neighborhoods in Baghdad during the twentieth century. His experiences were highlighted by his brother's marriage to an Armenian⁸⁸ and him falling in love and having a relationship with a Muslim woman during the 1970s. The social barriers to relationships, especially between a Christian man and Muslim woman, were significant but not insurmountable. Youssef was willing to commit to Islam in order to marry his girlfriend; "signing a piece of paper or mumbling a few words were no big deal, as far as he was concerned."⁸⁹ In fact her father's objections centered more on Youssef's age and his lack of a college education. The fact that education and age differences were more heavily considered than the suitor's religion indicates the lack of emphasis on religious or sectarian identity in Iraq during the twentieth century. The inter-religious marriages between Muslims and Jews or Christians posed a social barrier, like interracial marriages in the US and it was not as uncommon as it might be believed. Inter-

⁸⁷ Antoon, Sinan. *The Baghdad Eucharist*. 31.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 38.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 51.

sectarian marriages between Shia and Sunni were frequent and were especially common in mixed neighborhoods within larger urban centers.⁹⁰

Sinan Antoon uses the symbolism of turbans as a disparaging reference to the sectarian firebrands who gained influence in the newly formed Iraqi government. By referring to sectarian leaders as “the turbans” or “the turbaned ones” Antoon creates a dehumanizing othering effect to portray the fundamentalists as outsiders and manipulators of Iraqi society. The protagonist, Youssef, remains confident that “the turbans will unravel, in due course. But that girl, Maha... she doesn’t believe there was a time when sectarianism didn’t exist.”⁹¹ He uses the traditional clothing to refer to the fundamentalist representatives and spokesmen who were attempting to reinvigorate antiquated ideas of sectarian animosity, which would make them, as religious leaders, into authority figures. The use of fundamentalist and sectarian ideology is a simple ploy used in order to gain political power. Youssef remains convinced it is only a passing trend that will soon be corrected because it does not represent real Iraqi character.

Maha strongly disagrees with her uncle, and her pessimistic outlook is defined by her limited life experiences before the post-Saddam era of Iraq. “Perhaps Youssef was right on one count, when he said that nothing prior to 2003 bore any resemblance to the savagery that came afterward.”⁹² Youssef further expresses his desire for the return to a more peaceful era prior to the arrival of Americans and religious zealots. He reflects on his preference to the days before the Americans came because there was peace and stability even though political freedoms were absent, “I could go and come as I pleased. I could sleep under a tree or in a corner anywhere and no one bothered me. Now I have to

⁹⁰ Ibid. 62.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid. 95.

get a room in a hostel or else get killed. And the massive concrete blast walls are suffocating us. I swear to God, even the date palms are Sunni and Shiite now.”⁹³ Maha is unable to share her uncle’s outlook that the violence is a passing trend because to her the dangers and fear have preoccupied her daily existence throughout the formative years of her life. She was forced to move from her home in al-Dawra, a mixed neighborhood in southern Baghdad, due to threats from Sunni insurgents; first in the form of written notes nailed to their door, then through hand grenades thrown in through their windows. Shortly after that a church was burned down.⁹⁴ Then a family member was kidnapped and executed. Eventually her uncle Youssef is also killed in the attack on the Syriac church in 2010. To Maha the devolution of Iraqi society into sectarian conflict was a slow and methodical process that she could no longer endure.

Sinan Antoon emphasizes the religious tolerance that was commonly found in Iraq before the US occupation by describing the inter-sectarian relationships that existed in the mixed neighborhoods across Baghdad. When Maha’s father is forced to move his family out of the Dawra neighborhood he delivers the keys to his home and shop to his neighbor, Abu Muhammad, who apologized as the two men embraced “We didn’t look out for you. You were entrusted to our care and we didn’t protect you.”⁹⁵ This emphasizes the sense of duty among Baghdadi neighbors, a loyalty that outweighs any religious or sectarian boundaries, because the humanity of the collective community is more important than the extremist rhetoric. Abu Muhammad, a clearly Muslim name feels a sense of shame for his inability to protect his neighbor. Meanwhile Maha’s father still appears to trust his Muslim neighbor with the keys to his home and shop which

⁹³ Ibid. 65.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 97.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 98.

signals that, like Youssef, he expects his displacement to be a temporary circumstance. Antoon again reiterates the inorganic nature of sectarian violence in Iraq during the final scene of the novel. After surviving the attack on the church Maha agrees to give an interview about her account of the standoff. She describes the attackers as non-Iraqi based on their Arabic dialects. This is accurate based on intelligence and police reports published after the attack, most if not all of the assaulters were from other Arab countries. The emphasis by Antoon on the Syrian and Egyptian dialects used by the terrorists reinforces the idea that any ideology that responds with hostility to religious diversity is an inherently foreign concept being projected onto the Iraqi society.

Ahmed Saadawi

Like Sinan Antoon, Ahmed Saadawi is a famous Iraqi writer known for his work as a novelist, screenwriter, poet, and documentary filmmaker. Saadawi was born in 1973 and grew up in Sadr City, the well-known impoverished Shia neighborhood of eastern Baghdad that became infamous due to its creation and support of the Mahdi Army, loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr against coalition forces throughout the US occupation. From 2005 to 2007 Saadawi worked as a correspondent for the BBC covering the increasingly violent scenes as the capital city became the battleground between rival militias. It was during this period that he came up with the idea behind *Frankenstein in Baghdad* when he witnessed the results of the numerous attacks which left only partial and incomplete remains for the victims' families to retrieve from the morgue. Saadawi published *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in Arabic in 2013 and the following year he became the first Iraqi author to receive the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Unlike Antoon and Blasim, Saadawi remains in Baghdad where he continues to write about and bring

awareness to the social issues that plague his country. The novel was translated to English in 2018 and quickly became one of the most popular Iraqi novels among western audiences.

The success of Ahmed Saadawi largely stems from his ability to show his audience how average Iraqis responded to the extraordinary levels of violence which became a part of everyday life in Baghdad's streets in 2005 and 2006. His variety of characters embodies the heterogeneous population and the survival and coping mechanisms which people used to endure the horrific realities of war. Some characters attempt to capitalize on the tragic situation and maximize their individual wealth or status by seizing the opportunities that emerge out of the chaos of war. Others simply try to survive in a hell on earth that no longer resembles the Baghdad they previously knew. Saadawi presents the absurdity of the continuous cycle of violence that defined the reality of the most intense years of sectarian violence in such a way that the mystical realism and supernatural elements are hardly even shocking for the reader to accept. The story does not follow a linear trajectory and switches abruptly from one character's narrative to another as often as it jumps forward and backward through time which reinforces the chaotic atmosphere of the setting by creating a complex and often dizzying effect for the reader.

The characters featured in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* represent a wide variety of the Iraqi population in the way of the mundane interactions of a small community in the Bataween. Relationships between old friends who have bonded during the two decades of shared suffering during the Iran-Iraq War and the international economic sanctions as well as hostilities between business rivals are used by Saadawi to show the complex

relationships and the conditions that formed them. In addition to the external struggles, many of Saadawi's characters face internal struggles with identity, especially the title character. However, the problems of identity that one would expect to see during the Iraq civil war such as sectarian allegiances are generally absent from the conversation. While religious affiliations are well known and established among the residents of Bataween, it only makes up a part of their identity and it never drives the nature of interaction. The common link is that each of the characters, whether Christian, Sunni, Shia, or supernaturally created monster all identify as Iraqi without question. The ethno-religious origins are more commonly expressed simply as adjectives that describe family background and personal history; they do not predetermine the interactions of characters based on set social biases that drive individual behavior. Saadawi's use of multiple narrators helps to reinforce this by providing the perspectives of various Iraqis who struggle with various concepts of identity except sectarian allegiances, which are generally described as an anomalous phenomenon perpetrated by misguided and hostile actors who are never explored with any meaningful examination.

Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi primarily takes place in the Bataween neighborhood located on the east side of the Tigris River in central Baghdad. It was originally a predominantly Jewish neighborhood until many Iraqi Jews were forced to leave Iraq following the establishment of the state of Israel. Iraqi Christians then began to move to the neighborhood in the 1950s until they too immigrated in large numbers in the 1990s. The neighborhood then declined into a slum known as the "African ghetto" due to the large number of (mostly Sudanese) migrant workers. Bataween became synonymous with immoral behavior and infamous for the large

presence of drugs, alcohol, and prostitutes. The use of Bataween during 2005 as the primary setting is a salient choice because the diverse neighborhood of Muslims, Christians, Arabs, Armenians, and foreigners living in historic Jewish houses contrasts with the way in which Iraqi communities were represented in the media during the country's descent into the chaos of sectarian war – especially following the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in February 2006.

The events of the novel are set in motion by a junk dealer named Hadi who lives in a dilapidated house, known as the “Jewish ruins” due to the architecture, on Lane 7 in Bataween. After his business partner and close friend Nahem is killed by a car bomb in an adjacent neighborhood to the south named Karada, Hadi is distressed by the inability to bury Nahem. The blast reduced the body to such an extent that it was impossible to distinguish his friend's flesh from the horse he had been riding. Hadi decides to collect the body parts of victims from other indiscriminant attacks in order to stitch together a complete corpse that can then be given a proper burial. Shortly after Hadi completes his morbid project a Sudanese suicide bomber detonates a truck in front of a hotel resulting in the death of a guard named Hasib. Hasib's soul then becomes lost since his body is completely incinerated by the blast and leaves no corpse to which his disoriented soul can attach itself for the journey to the afterlife. Hasib's soul floats through the city until he finds Hadi's creation and supernaturally attaches his spirit to the corpse. The corpse comes to life with a new conscience, no longer associated with Hasib's spirit, and named by Hadi in the original Arabic text as the *Shesma*, which roughly translates to “the Whatsitsname” in the Iraqi dialect. After supernatural transformation is completed the

Shesma awakens and begins his Kafkaesque journey and existential struggle to understand his purpose in a setting that straddles fantasy and reality.⁹⁶

The *Shesma*'s first interaction is with Elishva, the senile elderly Christian neighbor who lives alone in the house connected to Hadi's ramshackle dwelling. Elishva mistakes the *Shesma* for her son Daniel who never returned from the Iran-Iraq War and provides a place from which he can begin his work. The *Shesma* sets out on his mission of revenge by killing the people responsible for the deaths of victims from whose bodies he was manufactured. The *Shesma* soon faces a dilemma; after he avenges one of the victims, the piece of flesh from that victim then decomposes and falls off and he must replace it with a piece from another innocent victim. The *Shesma* gradually captures the attention of residents, the media, and Iraqi authorities as a vigilante and folkloric hero with superhuman abilities, one of which is that he cannot be killed with bullets.

After the rise of his popularity, the *Shesma* acquires a cult-like following initially made up of three madmen and three "assistants" he names "the Sophist," "the Enemy," and "the Magician" who treat him with reverence and help him with his mission. These followers help the *Shesma* by finding suitable replacement parts and keeping him and his mission alive. As the number of followers increase and take up residence in an abandoned apartment building they split into distinct groups based on how the three assistants each interpret the *Shesma*'s fundamental essence. Each group attempts to define his mission based on their respective ideologies which results in a hostile rivalry within his following. The size of the following eventually reaches critical mass and becomes unmanageable. The followers begin using replacement parts from the flesh of

⁹⁶ Even the name *Shesma*, though an Iraqi term, is similar to Samsa, the surname of Franz Kafka's protagonist in *The Metamorphosis*.

murderers and criminals, not just innocent victims. This has a corrupting effect on the *Shesma* whose collective conscience seems to be molded by the origin of his parts. Eventually the following unravels when the sub-group animosities boil over into a violent battle that kills many and scatters the survivors.

Meanwhile the *Shesma* gains the attention of a special unit led by Brigadier General Sorour Majid, a former intelligence officer who continues to serve in the Iraqi Army thanks to a rare exemption to the de-Baathification policy. Majid's ambiguously-named Tracking and Pursuit Department is responsible for investigating unusual crimes, urban legends, and superstitious rumors. The department employs parapsychologists, astrologers, soothsayers, and specialists who communicate with the djinn in order to predict significant crimes in order to prevent attacks such as car bombings and assassinations in the future. Majid is a pragmatist who accepts the unconventional methods utilized by his staff simply because the secret unit holds a proven track record of preventing past attacks. Majid sees the *Shesma*, known as "Criminal X" in the media and to his department "He Who Has No Name," as an opportunity because capturing the notorious criminal would certainly lead to individual advancement in the form of a promotion and a lofty position.

Ultimately Majid's unit is able to locate the *Shesma* at Elishva's home but the operation is compromised when a suicide bomber detonates a truck in front of the house hours after Elishva has left to immigrate to Australia. One of the astrologers on Majid's staff tried to kill the *Shesma* by using magic to remotely control the actions of the suicide bomber. Many of the buildings are damaged or destroyed and Hadi is severely wounded and burned by the explosion which leaves him disfigured and hardly recognizable. The

events lead to a formal inquiry into the Tracking and Pursuit Department that leads to its disbanding and Majid's reassignment. The story ends with an announcement by national security commanders announcing the arrest of the now deformed Hadi, who is accused of being the *Shesma*. Though several residents of Bataween have their doubts, the citizens of Baghdad celebrate the news in the streets with celebratory gunfire, playing music, and dancing in the streets because the chaos and indiscriminant violence of the *Shesma* appear to be at an end. The date of the announcement conspicuously noted: February 21, 2006 and the celebrations are soon cut-off by a forewarning storm.⁹⁷

Universal Culpability. *Frankenstein In Baghdad* presents a diverse cast of characters from across the Iraqi social spectrum who are attempting to adapt to the horrific realities of everyday existence in 2005 Baghdad. A result of the survivalist mentality is that it reduces individuals' sense of humanity and as the war wears on people continue to grow more self-interested which collectively tears at the social fabric of the local and national community. Ambitious journalists, disreputable drunkards, opportunistic businessmen, and power-hungry officials are all connected by their contribution to the problems plaguing their country. Characters such as Faraj profit from the chaos and lawlessness by illegally seizing "several houses of unknown ownership and renting the rooms to workers from the provinces or to families displaced from nearby areas for sectarian reasons."⁹⁸ Like many others, Faraj fails to see how his survivalist mentality is contributing to the deteriorating social situation. Saadawi is more critical of

⁹⁷ The bombing of the al-Askari Mosque by Al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorists occurred the morning of February 22, 2006 which destroyed the golden dome of one of the holiest Shiite shrines. This event sparked a period of intense sectarian violence across Iraq between Shia and Sunni militias who bombed Mosques, assassinated religious leaders, and killed tens of thousands of civilians. This is often considered the definitive start point of the sectarian civil war in Iraq.

⁹⁸ Sa' dāwī, Aḥmad. *Frankenstein In Baghdad: A Novel*. Translated by Jonathan Wright. (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 12

those who understand, but disregard, how their actions negatively affect their country in order to pursue selfish desires such as the Saidi, the magazine editor. Saidi seeks “to exploit every piece of info we can get to embarrass the Americans and the government”⁹⁹ because it will sell more papers and benefit his personal and political ambitions despite the negative effect the salacious stories will have on the legitimacy of the government and its ability to make tangible progress. Saadawi shows how most Iraqis are guilty of contributing to the worsening social and security situation in some way even though they may not be aware of it. Subtle condemnation of the Iraqi population is common in contemporary Iraqi fiction that critiques everyone in a slight way, while leaving the more obvious criticism for the government and religious authority figures.

The Iraqi government is portrayed as a nameless group of corrupt men who emerged from the chaos and to become most successful Iraqis at pursuing their individual interests by working with the occupation authorities. Similar to the stories written by Hassan Blasim and Sinan Antoon, coalition forces are only peripherally involved in the storyline. Descriptions of the sound of helicopters flying over Bataween or “a traffic jam caused by American hummers...the troops on top of the vehicles pointing their weapons at the cars behind” are used to add realism to the story. Despite direct descriptions of US entities in the story being generally relegated to the imagery of the cityscape, the role of the US-led coalition in the declining security situation remains obvious. Saadawi skillfully utilizes satire to criticize the perspective of the US but also portrays the view of many Iraqis during the occupation, “there were two fronts now... the Americans and the [Iraqi] government on one side, the terrorists and the various antigovernment militias on the other. In fact ‘terrorist’ was the term used for everyone who was against the

⁹⁹ Sa‘ dāwī, *Frankenstein In Baghdad*, 73.

government and the Americans.”¹⁰⁰ The uncreative labeling of all groups who did not support the new Iraqi government as nefarious actors in the early stages of the provisional government is viewed as indolent and unproductive because it fails to differentiate violent extremists from those who want a better future for Iraq but simply disagree with the US policies or methods.

Most of the characters bemoan the state of Iraq but fail to recognize their role in making the situation worse because they are blinded by their own self-interest and by rationalizing their behavior. The *Shesma* is the only one to struggle with moral dilemmas and his role in improving Iraq, but Saadawi repeatedly assesses the universal guilt of a nation in which “each of us has a measure of criminality”¹⁰¹... “[t]here are no innocents who are completely innocent or criminals who are completely criminal”¹⁰² because “we are all criminals to some extent.”¹⁰³ Ironically the *Shesma*’s mission to bring justice to the country by killing the guilty parties and avenging the victims actually contributes to the deteriorating security conditions. He becomes a notorious folk hero contributing to the collective fear to the point that the entire neighborhood celebrates in the street when news of his capture is announced. Ultimately, even the title hero has some degree of culpability because of his contribution to the atmosphere of fear that looms over Bagdad throughout the story.

Saadawi points out how fear contributed to the worsening situation, because there were many misunderstandings due to the lack of information and the spread of rumors and misinformation. Inexplicable violence and fear of the unknown leads individuals to

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 156.

¹⁰² Ibid., 214.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 227.

interpret events such as the *Shesma*'s actions incorrectly. "Fear of the Whatsitsname continued to spread. In Sadr City they spoke of him as a Wahhabi, in Adamiya as a Shiite extremist. The Iraqi government described him as an agent of foreign powers, the US State Department said he was an ingenious man whose aim was to undermine the American project in Iraq."¹⁰⁴ As a result of the chaos and terror the national community of Iraq reverted to traditional forms of individual identity which had previously been discounted as trivial by most Iraqis living in mixed neighborhoods. Fear had a mutual relationship to the emergence of sectarianism, and the correlation is represented by Saadawi as both causal and significant. "We're dying from the fear of dying. The groups that have given shelter and support to Al-Qaeda have done so because they are frightened of another group, which was created to protect itself from Al-Qaeda. It has created a death machine ...each group is afraid of the Other."¹⁰⁵ The "othering" effect is common in a war, however it is pointed out that in this the advent of "othering" via sectarianism among a previously-harmonious diverse population is what led to the outbreak of violence.

National Unity. The *Shesma* personifies the amalgamated heterogeneous nature of the Iraqi population, a body comprised of different parts from Iraqi corpses. There is no distinction of sect or affiliation during collection or assemblage, every part is simply from an Iraqi victim whose death must be avenged. This is why he is referred to by some of his followers as "Iraqi Citizen Number One" because his composition personifies the heterogeneity of the Iraqi people.¹⁰⁶ The heterogeneous composition of the *Shesma*, whose parts all work together to accomplish a righteous notion of justice, is juxtaposed to

¹⁰⁴ Sa' dāwī, *Frankenstein In Baghdad*, 268.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

the divisive and dysfunctional Iraqi nation who is unable to find a unifying goal. The group of followers working for the *Shesma* serves as an allegory for the sectarian conflict. They all claim a cult-like loyalty to the *Shesma* and his mission, but the followers divide themselves into groups regarding the true nature and purpose of the *Shesma*'s existence. The followers violently turn against each other despite their common allegiance and desire to support the *Shesma* just as Iraqis allowed sectarian ideologies to divide themselves into violent militias and political parties. The lamentation of sectarianism is expressed by the senior astrologer sarcastically who quips "Only God is without a sect or party" during a lively discussion about religious topics with a taxi driver.¹⁰⁷ The *Shesma*'s heterogeneity and rectitude, the allegory of his followers who kill each other to the detriment of their leader, and the astrologer's cynicism all deride the pointless inanity of the sectarian division that was taking place during the US occupation.

The mixed Bataween neighborhood is used to represent a microcosm of the wider Iraqi population. As commonly found in previously discussed novels, inter-sectarian relationships between Bataween neighbors are commonplace and not contentious because there are more uniting factors than divisive ones. Elishva and her neighbor Umm Salim have lost loved ones during the war and share a hatred for a neighbor who used to be a notorious Ba'athist official. Like many Iraqis in the past century, the two women are united by their shared reality and past experiences with suffering and loss. Saadawi makes a point to describe the religious background of most characters either directly or indirectly, but the apathetic manner in which religion factors into personal relationships indicates its insignificance. These descriptions are contrasted with the inane animosity

¹⁰⁷ Sa' dāwī, Ahmed. *Frankenstein In Baghdad*, 318. Quote from the original Arabic novel, this particular dialogue was not included in the English version of the novel. Translation by author.

that emerges between the *Shesma*'s followers. The assistants serve as an allegory for the political institutionalization of sectarian, ethnic, and religious infighting.¹⁰⁸ Despite all believing in the virtuous and righteous nature of the *Shesma*'s mission, they allow their disagreements along ideological and philosophical beliefs to create a schism within their ranks. Eventually this irrational behavior leads to a self-defeating conflict which results in the meaningless deaths of many young men. This allegory allows Saadawi to simultaneously satirize the Ba'athist system of clan-based loyalty along with the post-Saddam sectarian-based politics which were each implemented at the expense of the country they claimed to be protecting.

The use of mysticism by Ahmed Saadawi helps to subvert the sectarian narrative that is used to explain the Iraqi demographic along convenient ethno-religious identities. First it should be mentioned that magic is considered a *jahili* practice in Islam. The Qur'an refers to Astrology as an evil practice that could summon manipulative powers but were actually sent by God as a temptation to men.¹⁰⁹ Soothsayers (fortune tellers) are also specifically referenced in the Qur'an as well as numerous hadiths for their blasphemous nature.¹¹⁰ Despite the haram nature of magic, it plays an important role in the story and helps to counter sectarianism by tapping in to the established tradition of Iraqi literature that emphasizes the country's pre-Islamic history. The use of magic is common in Iraqi folklore dating back to Mesopotamian mythology such as Gilgamesh. It is also a common source of cultural pride that astrology originated in Babylon and later

¹⁰⁸ Murphy, Sinead. "Frankenstein in Baghdad: Human conditions, or conditions of being human" *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol 45, No. 2. 2018), 275.

¹⁰⁹ *Qur'an* 2:102 specifically mentions a sorcery that originated in Babylon from two angels banished from heaven. "Whosoever [practices magic] has no share in the Hereafter. Evil is that for which they sold their souls."

¹¹⁰ *Qur'an* 52:29, 69:42.

spread to the west via Alexandria. The story presents the soothsayers and astrologers in a more positive way compared to characters representing sectarian ideologies. The most obvious example is that the astrologers are fully developed characters unlike the militia fighter. The astrologers wield a considerable amount of power and respect on Majid's staff and the soothsayers' predictions are often more accurate than other intelligence reports. The nature of these characters with roots in Iraq's ancient, pre-Islamic history are clearly favorable when compared to the sectarian militias who are often described in the same sentences and with similar descriptions as the criminals and murders. Saadawi develops the astrologers and details their attempts to prevent attacks while grouping sectarian fighters with the nefarious "others" or outsiders in the storyline contributing to Baghdad's descent into chaos. The juxtaposition makes it clear that the magicians with their ancient powers of insight and necromancy are truly concerned for public safety and the future of Iraq while the fundamentalists are only concerned with achieving power through extreme violence.

Common Themes

The Iraqi literary production in the twenty-first century has largely continued the themes that emerged in the mid-twentieth century while also adopting new literary styles that establish a unique voice for Iraqis in response to the 2003 invasion. Each of the authors discussed in the textual analysis represents Iraqi perspectives as a counter-narrative to the literary production that has occurred in the west following the war. Continuing to employ the themes introduced by Iraqi literati offers a sense of familiarity that connects the audience to the stories of protest and dissent that were published prior to the rise of the Ba'ath Party in 1968. Themes of mourning, natural landmarks, and

Mesopotamian history establish the stories as distinctly Iraqi rather than a more common Arab experience.

Using Iraqi geography and specific landmarks located in Iraq helps to ground the stories to Iraq and provides the audience with familiar locations. Most of the mid-century literati, especially poets, tended to describe the rural landscapes of Iraq such as nature and Iraqi peasants found outside of the rural cities. The modern Iraqi literati more commonly use descriptions of the urban environment likely because this is the more common experience for their audiences since over seventy percent of Iraq's population lives in urban environments. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are emphasized by each of the authors because it unites Iraqis spatially since the rivers traverse across Iraq, but the rivers also connect linearly through time to the ancient civilizations of Iraq. Ahmed Saadawi uses real neighborhoods of Baghdad that help to keep the story tethered to reality even as the narrative ventures off into mysticism and ethereal realms. Hassan Blasim uses the crossing of the Martyr's bridge to support the idea of cooperation between sectarian militias, exposing the fraudulent and emptiness of the claims being made by such groups during the war. Each of the authors uses Iraqi geography and common imagery to add depth and realism to their stories. Rivers, cities, security checkpoints, date palms, and scenes of indiscriminant violence are all relatable images with which most Iraqis can identify, regardless of ethno-sectarian backgrounds. Describing the cities of origin of Baghdadi characters subtly provides the informed reader with details about sectarian or political predispositions without calling attention to it. Describing Baghdadi companions with family origins from Anbar and Najaf, or Mosul

and Basra, implies the inter-sectarian nature of their friendship that pre-dates and flouts the sectarian tensions and civil war occurring in the streets of Baghdad.

Language is another method of establishing the uniquely Iraqi-nature of the stories specifically through the use of Iraqi dialect. Authors commonly use the Baghdadi dialect of Iraqi Arabic which is the lingua franca across Iraq. Words and expressions are commonly used in the dialogues between characters, while Modern Standard Arabic is used in the narration of the story. The diglossia present in modern Iraqi fiction adds a realistic element to the story which then makes the text more relatable to the reader. The Iraqi dialect, particularly the Baghdadi subgroup, faintly speaks to the history and heterogeneity of Iraq because it includes loan words from Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, among other influences. This was commonly used by twentieth century literati prior to al-Takarli's *The Long Way Back*. Using the pre-Islamic heritage of Iraq is a more obvious method of leveraging history in order to promote a sense of unity among Iraqis just as it was used in the past. In *The Baghdad Eucharist* Sinan Antoon points out the ironic short-sightedness of the Islamists who question the loyalty of Christian-Iraqis and associate them with the foreign occupation by highlighting the fact that the various sects of Christians and Jews existed in Baghdad centuries before Islam was introduced to the region. Saadawi similarly pays homage to pre-Islamic pagan traditions through his use of magic and mysticism throughout the novel. The practice of the soothsayers and astrologists are legitimized due to the accuracy of their predictions compared to modernists using advanced methods and scientific processes to understand the security situation and to catch the *Shesma*. These are neither new nor irrelevant features of Iraqi literature; this is a continuation of themes that emerged in mid-century Iraq designed to

contribute to a sense of unity within Iraq's diverse population by drawing from unifying aspects of Iraqi history that transcend any modern identity politics.

Modern Iraqi literati have also built upon the 'Culture of Mourning' which has been a distinguishing feature of Arabic poetry, stories, and songs for centuries and simply reintroduced these themes in a present-day context. Twentieth century writers such as al-Sayyab grieved over the devastated state of Iraq due to general concepts such as foreign interference and government ineptitude while al-Jawahiri mourned specific events such as the death of his brother Jafar during the *al-Wathbah* of 1948. Modern writers capture the general atmosphere of pessimism, exasperation, and fear which weighed on the backs of all Iraqis after the invasion. Sadaawi refers to the tragic stampede on the *al-Aaimmah* bridge, Sinan Antoon describes the attack against the Church of Our Lady of Salvation, and all three modern authors analyzed above refer to the attack against the *al-Askari* Mosque. These authors are able to create a sense of sorrow that has become synonymous with Iraqi literature but makes the mood more tangible to the reader by connecting the general attitude to specific events that elicit somber memories of events that occurred during the occupation of Iraq. However, modern Iraqi literati have not remained stagnant in their use of mourning; they have incorporated it in to a newly emerged theme of the grotesque which also exemplifies the unnerving nature of Iraqi existence during the war. The settings often overlap fantasy and reality as well as discombobulating jumps from past to present in a way that reflects the internal struggle of Iraqis to understand the purpose for such rampant and indiscriminant violence. All of the authors discussed in this paper refer to the routine nature of death and corpses in the streets of Baghdad. Writing about the trauma of these horrific experiences is a unique part of the Iraqi identity in the

twenty-first century; however the current wars in Syria and Yemen are likely to contribute similar experiences to the broader corpus of Arabic literature. What is unique in the case of Iraqi literature is the unifying effect of suffering which adds another layer of cohesion because it affects all Iraqis the same regardless of tribal or ethno-sectarian origins.

The US military and government is not a prominent feature in modern Iraqi literature despite the obvious role played since 2003. Like the mid-century Iraqi literati who represented the British in an indirect way by focusing on the corrupting effects of the British on Iraqi characters, such as Dhu al-Nun Ayyub's protagonist in *Doctor Ibrahim*, contemporary writers are unlikely to feature Americans as primary characters. Beyond the lack of three-dimensional western characters, there is rarely any direct engagement between the US forces and the protagonist other than manning checkpoints or flying overhead. Coalition forces are more commonly used to establish the setting by contributing to an atmosphere of fear, pressure, or confusion. Despite the indirect roles of American characters, the themes of anti-colonialism and opposition to foreign interference have seamlessly continued into the twenty-first century Iraqi literature. Some poems from al-Bayati and al-Sayyab were commonly reused and expressed in opposition to the US occupation by simply substituting American for British references. Thus the sentiment continues to emerge with the modern literati, though there is some inconsistency in the modern works.

Some writers portray America as the neo-colonialist occupier who skillfully manipulates Iraqi society from a comfortable distance by influencing Iraqi leaders with power and money. This portrayal assumes the US possesses some all-knowing and

omnipresent ability about how to control Iraq using a combination of modern technological capabilities in addition to British techniques of ‘divide and conquer’ proven successful in the past. However, this conflicts with the other common typical representation of US forces as aloof, confused, and inept. Saadawi describes the US as just another element working with the Iraqi forces and contributing to the chaos and violence in the streets of Baghdad, rarely distinguishing the US from the Iraqi government. Meanwhile Blasim more commonly portrays Americans as detached from the realities of the suffering that is caused by their actions or as an easily deceived character who unwittingly does the bidding of the powerful Iraqis who have garnered the favor of the powerful, yet ignorant, American government. Iraqis capitalized on the chaos for their own personal benefit, financially, politically, or otherwise. There are many references to the Iraqis who have benefitted from the social disorder that followed the 2003 invasion such as Blasim’s artifacts smuggler working with the protection of the corrupt police or Saadawi’s character, Faraj the realtor, who claims ownership of properties abandoned by families who flee Iraq. These opportunistic Iraqis are portrayed negatively in modern fiction because their ability to survive and succeed implies some sort of dissolute relationship with the occupying forces in which they profit at the expense of their country’s collapse. Meanwhile the characters that portray ethical behavior according to traditions and social norms are more likely to become the victims of violence or are left destitute due to the immoral actions of others who have successfully manipulated the US government.

Whether the US is presented as an ignorant and naïve outsider or a menacing and omniscient puppet master orchestrating Iraq’s demise, the US military is simply a part of

the setting that describes the occupied Iraqi landscape. This was the common experience because the average Iraqi citizen did not take the time to get to know the occupiers manning the checkpoints at the individual level. The checkpoints are just a part of the occupied landscape just like the newly installed 12-ft cement wall barriers. The daily convoys and nightly raids are just disruptive occurrences like the summer heat or winter storms, it is just a part of the reality of living in Iraq. Referring to the presence of American military units in the everyday scenes of life during the occupation contributes to feelings of victimhood, suffering, and fear that are powerfully conveyed in Iraqi literature by simply existing in the background of the storyline. This is a deliberate counter to the robust collection of literature which almost exclusively publishes the Iraq War experience from the western perspective. Thousands of American accounts focus on the heroic actions of soldiers trying to survive through their deployment or the struggles with re-integrating into civilian life following their return. These accounts commonly depict Iraqis in a negative light or as the ubiquitous “other” despite the story taking place in his own country. The salient difference between the Iraqi and US accounts of the war is that Americans describe enduring intense periods of stress during combat before eventually returning home to tell their tale, meanwhile the Iraqi experience and account of the war is constant and never-ending. The 2003 invasion is simply the most recent example in a cycle of suffering that began with the Iran-Iraq War. The Iraqi literati provide a counter narrative by telling stories from the perspective of Iraqis that returns the occupation forces to their appropriate roles in the background that only occasionally enter the story, often with violent or tragic consequences. Despite the lack of direct involvement of American characters in the stories, the role of the US contributing to the

general feelings of fear and suffering is a relatable theme and represents the Iraqi experience that was common for all Iraqis irrespective of individual identity and thus has a unifying effect for Iraqi readers.

The final theme commonly present is the direct or indirect criticism against sectarianism as a significant role in individual or political identity. Rarely does sect or religion play an important role in how individual characters interact with each other; when it does occur it is usually in order to demonstrate the shortcomings of such simple perspectives. Characters often juxtapose the change in Iraqi society between pre- and post-2003 through the narration or dialogues between characters. Sectarian identity before the twenty-first century was considered a frivolous fact that played a part in individual identity but certainly was not a defining trait. Most narrators discuss the rise of sectarianism as a phenomenon that is inorganic to Iraqi society and linked to the politics of fundamentalists as a method (learned from Saddam) of effective social engineering for political power. There is recognition and acceptance that there had been ethno-sectarian based actions by the Saddam regime which brutally suppressed the Kurdish and Shia uprisings during the 1980s and 1990s. However these facts are not justified or defended by Sunni characters, but rather these events are used to represent the larger trend of suppression at the hands of Ba'athists that affected all demographics of Iraqis.

The most common assertion is that sectarianism was exacerbated by politically motivated fundamentalists who would benefit the most from an Iraq centered on religious identities. However, some authors all demonstrate that sectarian tension was an invention by US powers in Iraq, in order to create a loyal majority ruling party able to be controlled even through a democratically elected process. This is more commonly found in the

works by those who perceive of the US as having omniscient powers and the ability to execute massive social engineering programs, but this contrasts with the narratives that portray the US as ignorant of Iraqi society. Regardless of whether the US intentionally or mistakenly enabled the rise of sectarianism, all of the authors agree that certain Iraqis contributed to the trend by influencing the aforementioned gullible US decision makers in order to politically benefit from the division of people along sectarian allegiances.

Following the rise and outbreak of sectarian violence in 2006 Iraqis responded differently to the developments, older generations put less emphasis on it while the younger generations who came of age during the occupation and civil war lived in a world defined by sectarianism. Hasan Blasim and Sinan Antoon provide a closer look at the generational divide in Iraq regarding the role of sectarian identity. The characters able to remember the atmosphere of mid-century Iraq optimistically view post-2003 sectarianism as an ephemeral phase that is part of a dialectic continuum that must be navigated before Iraq returns to the halcyon days of political freedoms, a government that represented the will of the people, and an absence of foreign interference. Meanwhile the generations that only remember the hardship under the Saddam regime are more likely to see the rise in sectarianism as the most recent development in a long line of inexplicable and senseless suffering. Meanwhile, there is an entire generation of Iraqis who were molded by the realities of sectarian violence and the division of neighborhoods along sectarian identities which was made more permanent by the erection of large cement barriers between the Shia and Sunni neighborhoods of Baghdad.

The majority of Iraqi literature in the past century fails to address sectarianism as a meaningful aspect of Iraqi identity. The Iraqi literati do not ignore the divisions that

exist within the diverse population of their country; however they understand that Iraqis have more in common. Modern writers build on the unifying themes that were employed by previous generations such as geography, landmarks, language, pre-Islamic history, and a culture of mourning that connect Iraqis to their shared experiences. Sectarianism is almost exclusively only discussed in Iraqi literature since 2003 and those who do discuss it, such as the writers analyzed in this paper, treat it as a shocking and disturbing problem that does not accurately reflect Iraqi identity. Saadawi provides an allegory to illustrate the asinine nature of sectarianism and his character, the observant astrologer, sarcastically claims that God alone is the only one without sectarian or party affiliation. Sinan Antoon also treats the topic with mockery, exemplified when one of his characters claims that even the palm trees of Baghdad identify as Shia and Sunni. Meanwhile Hassan Blasim more directly criticizes the use of sectarianism by perfidious politicians who benefit from the assemblage of groups based on identity politics at the expense of the nation.

Conclusion

This project attempts to shed light on the importance of considering the intellectual community, specifically the literati, when attempting to understand a country with a complex social and historical background such as Iraq. After considering the works of fiction that have been written by Iraqi authors in response to the US occupation there is a noticeably different perspective on sectarianism between Iraqis and what is published in the west. It should be reiterated that this analysis does not claim that sectarian politics were not a factor after Iraqi independence or completely absent from concepts of identity in Iraqi society, but rather indicates that sectarian identity was a very small part of political movements in twentieth century Iraq. In the decades following the

establishment of the Iraqi nation many religious leaders, Shia and Sunni as well as Christian, were engaged in public debates regarding the role of religion in Iraqi society. This dialogue on religion continued even as intellectuals progressed further left towards secular ideologies of socialism and communism because religion was still a part of Iraq's history and identity. Islamic history and the Shia and Sunni traditions were important aspects of Iraqi culture but Iraqis embraced the religious heterogeneity because it exemplified a society of tolerance and added to national cultural richness. Mid-century literati represented the ideological developments by publishing their works of fiction and represented the wide range of views by Iraqi citizens. The influence of intellectuals has always played an important role in Iraqi society and the modern Iraqi literati prove that this continues to be the case in the twenty-first century by accurately reflecting the perspective of average Iraqi citizens. Literature is not something that policy experts tend to consider very seriously but as we have seen in the case of Iraq, disregarding the significance of intellectuals or the validity of their literary production can lead to momentous social and cultural misunderstandings. Continuing a misguided approach to the specific issue of sectarianism will be a limiting factor for Americans to understanding Iraqi society and thus limits our effectiveness to implement foreign policy objectives.

Much of the US approach to Iraq during counterinsurgency and reconstruction operations attempted to understand the country based on the antiquated cultural facts such as tribalism, religion, and ethno-sectarian identities. By incorrectly assuming the emphasis of traditional identities, experts ignored the fact that Iraq's heterogeneous society has been considered a source of strength since 1920. Not enough consideration was given to the effect of the urbanization process that brought millions of Iraqis into the

major cities across Iraq; Mosul, Basra, Baghdad. By 2003 over 70% of the population lived in urban environments where inter-sectarian engagement and cooperation were a common part of daily life. US planners and officials were focused primarily on the actions of the Saddam regime and ignored the political evolution of Iraq in the 20th century which had enthusiastically adopted modern philosophies and political ideologies.

The US emphasized the role of sect and tribal affiliations during the creation of the CPA and subsequent representative governments without considering that neither was particularly important to individual Iraqi identity. This miscalculation facilitated increased support for extremists who thrived in the sectarian environment established by the CPA. The promises of democracy and representative government were seemingly being replaced with confessionalism. Iraqis felt a sense of betrayal by the occupation authority and media discourses that enforced and reinforced sectarian and ethnic grouping due to their confusing demographic facts and power relations and seeing it as proof of ethno-sectarian strife and conflict.¹¹¹ The sectarian approach by the CPA was influential in the rise of identity politics and sectarian violence in 2005. Tens of thousands of deaths and the forced removal of millions Iraqis living in mixed neighborhoods occurred as a result of the sectarian conflict in Iraq between 2005 and 2008.

This paper is not intended to repeatedly underscore the shortcomings of policies or actions by the coalition forces, policy makers, or government advisors that occupied Iraq. Mistakes were made, but it does not mean that they must continue to be made. We must learn from these errors and make appropriate corrections in order to make better decisions in the future. We are approaching two decades since the invasion, and due to

¹¹¹ Musawi, *Reading Iraq*, 32.

the strategic importance of Iraq, it is unlikely that the US will disengage any time soon. Therefore it is vital that experts deepen their comprehension of Iraqi society in ways that are not reliant on over-simplistic social classifications or claims made by politicians and diplomats, each of which has misled US strategies in Iraq in the past. Focusing on sectarian divisions in the past enabled a false dichotomy which was counterproductive to US objectives in the Middle East and ignored opportunities to exploit intra-sectarian rifts. Continuing to approach Iraq (and the Middle East more broadly) from a sectarian perspective will only further exacerbate the issue of sectarianism, which hurts US policy objectives and works to the favor of Iran. Certainly there is currently a heightened awareness to sectarian identities, but as the textual analysis has demonstrated, this is an inorganic emphasis for most Iraqis. Placing less emphasis on sectarianism, while still maintaining awareness of its existence, can help to end this ugly period of religion-based identity politics and move to a post-sectarian era that is more indicative of how average Iraqis see themselves and their country.

The 2018 parliamentary elections point to the potential for an end to strictly sectarian-based politics and the possibility for inter-sectarian cooperation in national politics. Muqtada al-Sadr's "Sairun" (or "Forward") political bloc won the parliamentary election with a political alliance consisting of Shia, Communists, and other secular Iraqis. Despite being a Shiite cleric, al-Sadr used a non-sectarian nationalist campaign based on an anti-corruption and anti-foreign intervention platform (against both Iranian and US interference in Iraq), and he secured some marginal gains in traditionally Sunni neighborhoods of Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr's cross-sectarian and leftist leaning alliance appears to be at least partially genuine considering his severed ties with Iran and his

surprise visit with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia in 2017. In addition to the small political progress, the military defeat of the Islamic State terrorist group has proven to be a unifying moment for many Iraqis and could potentially open the door for improved US-Iraq relations that are better than when forces withdrew in 2011. Ahmed Saadawi observed that “ethnic and sectarian hatreds go back a thousand years in Iraq but that does not mean they have always been exploited. Today, after the elimination of [the Islamic State] in Iraq, we seem to have left the arena of sectarian conflict.”¹¹² Saadawi pessimistically doubts the durability of such agreeable relationships as only temporary because he believes that these moments are conducted in order to arrange political deals needed to obtain positions in the next government, much like the main character of *Doctor Ibrahim*. Even if inter-sectarian cooperation is only a political ploy that panders to the Iraqi voters, it is a salient point that such a gambit would appeal to public sentiments in the first place. If sectarianism was truly embedded in the Iraqi conscience the way many experts have purported then such public displays of inter-sectarian political cooperation, whether a pretense or not, would not resonate with the public.

The current protests in Iraq (and Lebanon) are evidence that sectarianism is a declining trend among Iraqis (as well as elsewhere in the Middle East). The problems of corruption and government ineptitude transcend any of the sectarian labels. Iraqi citizens from all ethno-sectarian backgrounds are against the entire political establishment which has failed to improve infrastructure, provide adequate healthcare or education, or implement economic policies to address the rampant unemployment problem among Iraqi

¹¹² Devi, Sharmila. “Ahmed Saadawi on being an artist ‘in Iraq’s chaotic boiler room’” *The Arab Weekly*. September 9, 2018. <https://thearabweekly.com/ahmed-saadawi-being-artist-iraqs-chaotic-boiler-room>

youth. The tensions in Iraq are originating from political demands; they are not based on sectarian identity. This has the potential to have a normalizing effect that can lead to a post-Sectarian era of Iraq that existed in the twentieth century. However, many sectarian leaders such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani will likely continue to push a sectarian narrative that benefits his party's agenda, and it would be easy to see this as further proof of Iraq's inherently sectarian society. To avoid being deceived by political rhetoric, efforts should be made to study the counter-narratives, such as that represented by the literati, as objective criticism that can add depth of knowledge. We would be better served by seeing these works as constructive challenges to commonly held assumptions that more accurately reflect the common Iraqi perspective rather than discounting them as nothing more than subversive detractors.

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