

Abstract

During the last few years, historians, sociologists and political experts have shown a growing interest in tribalism, ethnicity and religious identities in the Middle East and their influence on the stability of the states in the region.¹ Although Iraq is a state known to suffer from ethnic and sectarian conflicts and tribal rivalries, no comprehensive research has yet been done on this subject. This study tries to fill the vacuum.

This study attempts to answer the question: How tribalism, ethnicity and sectarianism have influenced the development of the Iraqi state (especially its national solidarity) during the period between 1920 and 1958? This question combines a few sub-questions, which are: What do tribalism, ethnicity, sectarianism and nationalism mean? What kind of relationship exists between them? What kind of relationship existed between the three major ethno-sectarian groups in Iraq (Sunni-Arabs, Shi'ites and Kurds) during the period mentioned, and who tribalism influenced this relationship? Who tribalism affected every ethnic group and sect mentioned? Which policy adopted by the Iraqi regime to deal with the tribes, ethnic groups and sects in Iraq, and how it affected the development of the political system in Iraq?

¹ See for example:

Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (ed.), Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East (London: Tauris, 1991).

Linda Layne, Home and Homeland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Amatzia Baram, "Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-1996", International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Volume 29, 1997, pp. 1-31.

Faleh Abdul-Jabar and Hosham Dawod (ed.), Tribes and Power, Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East (London: Saqi, 2004).

In order to deal with the terms *tribalism*, *ethnicity*, *sectarianism* and *nationalism*, we should refer first to them, as those terms are used in various ways and have various interpretations, their meanings must be defined in context.

Tribalism

The term *tribalism* affiliates from the term *tribe*. Sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists have defined the term *tribe* in different ways, so there is no one, generally accepted definition. The range of definitions extends from “primitive isolated organizations” to “a framework of loyalty and solidarity which can exist in non-isolated, even modern societies”.¹ Thus it is inevitable to define in every study which deals with the term the meaning of it. I have used Ernest Gellner’s definitions of *tribe* and *tribalism*. Gellner refers to the *tribe* as social, political and cultural unit based on solidarity and common identity, and characterized by kinship, common lineage (true or invented), feuds, self-definition, a symbiosis of pastoral and settled population, and leadership. For Gellner, *tribalism* is a framework of solidarity and loyalty which tends to exist even in so-called 'modern societies'. He states that the *tribe* can define itself by genealogy, territory or both. Kinship is well-observed, especially in the *hamula*, i.e., the extended

¹ For a variety of definitions of the term *tribe* see: Roger M. Keesing, Cultural Anthropology (London: Holt, 1975), pp. 118-119.

David E. Hunter and Philip Whitten, Encyclopedia of Anthropology (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 393-394.

William A. Haviland, Cultural Anthropology (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1975), pp. 314-315.

Patricia Crone, “The Tribe and The State”, in: J.A. Hall (ed.), States in History (New-York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 48-77.

John H. Bodley, Cultural Anthropology, Tribes, States and the Global System (California: Mayfield Publishing), 1994, p. 30.

Jules Henry, Jungle People, A Kaingang Tribe of The Highlands of Brazil (New York: Vintage Books, 1964).

family, and the *tribe* frequently consists of several such extended families which are usually inter-connected by marriage. It can also be referred to *tribalism* as a set of values, norms, and moral which is manifested in moral code, in tribal law and in political behaviour, such as tendency to make temporal agreements with the central ruler and other tribes.¹

Ethnicity and Sectarianism

The term *ethnicity* (and *ethnic group* which affiliates from it) as we know it today rarely appeared in anthropological studies before the nineteen fifties. Since then it has gained popularity and many meanings have been attached to it.² Some of those meanings are similar or identical to *tribalism* (including its various meanings/implications), while others distinct between *tribalism* and *ethnicity* and refer to *ethnicity* as a framework which relies on cultural attributes, such as language, religion and assumed common history.³ For the purposes of this study I have used Anthony Smith's definition for

¹ Ernest Gellner, Muslim Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 56-58.

Ernest Gellner, "Tribalism and the State in the Middle East", in Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (ed.), Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East, pp. 109-126.

Joseph Kostiner, "Transforming Dualities: Tribes and State Formation in Saudi Arabia", in Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (ed.), Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East, pp. 226-251.

² Walter P. Zenner, "Ethnicity", Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology (Editors: David Levinson and Melvin Ember, 1996) Vol. 2, pp. 393-395.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Varieties of Ethnic Politics and Ethnicity Discourse", in Edwin Wilmsen and Patrick McAllister (editors), The Politics of Difference (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 25.

Tibi, pp. 137-143.

³ Thomas Hyland Eriksen, Ethnicity and Nationalism, Anthropological Perspectives (London: Pluto, 1993), pp. 10-11.

Michael Moerman, "Who are the Lue: Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization", American Anthropologist, 1965, Vol. 67, pp. 1215-1229.

John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (ed.), Ethnicity (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1996), p. 15.

ethnicity. Smith refers to ethnicity as a framework of solidarity which relies on common cultural myths and common memories.¹

As for *sectarianism*, it affiliates from the term *sect*. The term *sect* in the religious sense, generally refers to one branch of a religion, as the Shi‘a and Sunna are branches of Islam. Sects are different schools of thought within a central religious belief, and each has its own institutions and even its own social and political organizations. Sometimes *sectarianism* has negative connotations, since a sect is often perceived as group of marginal individuals who oppose the religious mainstream, which is often represented by the state and considered the “true religion”.² It is important to note that an ethnic group is not necessarily religiously or sectarianly monolithic, and vice versa - a religious sect is also not necessarily ethnically monolithic. In Iraq there are Sunni Kurds and Shi‘ite Kurds, there are Arab Shi‘ites and Iranian Shi‘ites. In addition, there are Arab Sunnis and Kurdish Sunnis. Nevertheless, a distinction can be made between the three major sects in Iraq, as the overwhelming majority of Kurds are Sunnis, the Shi‘ites are almost entirely Arabs, and the Arab Sunnis are distinguished ethnically from the kurds and sectarianly from the Shi‘ites.³

Tribalism, *ethnicity* and *sectarianism* are well connected. We can refer to *ethnicity* and *sectarianism* as a systems of collective solidarity and loyalty residing in myths, memories, values and symbols, which strongly connected to *tribalism*. The political sociologist, Bassam Tibi, refers to tribes as sub-ethnic or sub-religious/sub-sectarian

¹Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 13-16.

²Richard H. Niebuhr, “Sectarianism”, in Edwin R.A. Seligman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Social Science* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), Volume 13, pp. 624-630.

Roland Robertson, “Sects and Cults”, in Adam Kuper (ed.), *The Social Science Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 762-763.

³ Tibi, p. 138.

units. The tribe in the Middle East, as Tibi suggests, is a subdivision of the ethnic or group or sect, as most of the ethnic groups and sects in the Middle East are socially organized as tribes, like the Kurds, Alawites, Druze and Pashtunes. For Tibi, ethnicity and religion in the Middle East cannot be dealt with without reference to tribalism.¹

As *Tribalism* concerns with smaller groups in which kinship is more visible (especially in the smallest tribal units), the tribal solidarity tends to be stronger than *ethnic* or *sectarian solidarities*.

Nationalism

The term *nationalism* has also many definitions. Some of them relate to it as a political ideology which strives to achieve sovereignty over a specific territory, others relate to it as an economic ideology which promotes a specific economic stratum and others regard it as an ideology which relies on the cultural solidarity of an ethnic group.²

For this study Anthony Smith's definition of *nationalism* was adopted. Smith refers to *nationalism* as a modern ideological movement developed in the end of the 18th century based on common myths and memories among people to attain solidarity and define themselves as a nation. Smith sees a strong link between *ethnicity*, religion and *nationalism*, since he also finds *ethnicity* (and religion) to be based on common myths

¹ Tibi, pp. 137-143.

Liah Greenfeld, Nationalism, Five Roads to Modernity (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 4-12. Daniel Segal and Richard Handler, "Nationalism", in David Levinson and Melvin Ember, Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), Vol. 3, pp. 844-847.

Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London : Verso, 2005).

and memories, but he distinguishes between the two. He asserts that *nationalism* is a modern ideology which is created by conversion of ethnic or religious loyalties to national ones. This ideology is well spread, according to Smith, through modernization (urbanization, modern education, industrialization, establishment of modern political institutions ect.).¹

Modernization can lead to the development of a national movement, but sometimes, as it happened in some Middle Eastern states (including Iraq), modernization can lead to ethnic, religious and sectarian conflicts which hindered the development of national solidarity.² One reason for this situation can be the way in which the most of the Middle Eastern states have been created. Most of the states in the Middle East did not develop from a national ideology, but were rather created by European states after the First World War. In this situation, ethnic groups, religions, sects and tribes have been the main frameworks of solidarity and remained so. As rapid modernization processes took place, ethnicity and religious tensions became sometimes even stronger, as one ethnic or religious group took control over the political system and promoted itself and discriminate against other ethnic or religious groups.³

It should be noted that *tribalism*, like *ethnicity*, religious diversity and *sectarianism*, is sometimes perceived as an obstacle to *nationalism* and sometimes as the base on which it

¹ Anthony Smith, The Ethnic Origins of Nations (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 2-15, 133-147.

² Donald Horowitz, Ethnic Groups in Conflict (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 96-105, 291-332.

Jacque Dofny and Akinsola Akiwowo (ed.), National and Ethnic Movements (California: Sage Studies, 1980).

Ted Robert Gurr (ed.), People Versus States (Washington: Institute of Peace Press, 2000), pp. 151-177, 276-277.

³ Tibi, pp. 142-144.

may rest.¹ In accordance with such perceptions, there were regimes in the Middle East which tried to fight against tribalism and even to end it, because it was viewed as an obstacle to the development of national solidarity and progress, as in Iraq during the reign of ‘Abd al-Karīm Qāssem (1958-1963), and in Iran under Reza Pahlavi (1921-1941). There were other regimes (like the Saudi, Qatari, Umani, Bahraini, kuwaiti and Jordanian regimes), however, which accepted the existence of *tribalism* and even enlisted it in order to get support from the tribes and develop national solidarity. In that regard Tibi gives as an example the ‘Alawite regime in Syria, which treat the ‘Alawite tribes as a national power in order to enlist their tribal solidarity in order to justify the ‘Alawites’ special status in Syria and in order to use the tribal solidarity for developing the Syrian nationalism. According to Tibi, such policy is not directly linked to tribal organization, but to the way in which an individual country chooses to develop its nationalistic movement.² Beginning in the nineteen eighties, Mu‘ammar al-Qadhdhāfi and Sā‘addām Hā‘usayn used tribalism to foster national solidarity and stabilize the regime. In Libya, Mu‘ammar al-Qadhdhāfi fostered tribalism around his own family and tribe, the al-Qadhhdhādhfa, because he was facing fierce opposition from, among other sources, the tribes.³ In Iraq, at the end of the nineteen eighties Sā‘addām also tried to stabilize his regime by fostering tribalism. He represented himself as the head of the Iraqi tribes and claimed it gave him the right to rule. Sometimes he redefined as tribes groups which were no longer tribal. In addition, he nominated tribal heads and gave them official posts and benefits. Using *tribalism*, he tried to play down ethnic tensions within Iraqi society,

¹ Tibi, pp. 128-129

² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³ Lisa Anderson, “Tribe and State: Libyan Anomalies”, in Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (London: Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (I.B. Tauris, 1991), pp. 288-302.

claiming that all Iraqis were members of tribes, and to justify the special status his extended family enjoyed by claiming that his tribe had privileges other tribes did not.¹

According to what have been mentioned above, it can be claimed that tribalism, ethnicity, sectarianism and nationalism are different frameworks of solidarity which tend to contradict. Tribalism seems to be the strongest framework of solidarity, as it is related to a smaller group of people than an ethnic group or sect or a nation, and relies on visible blood relations (at least in its basic form), while nationalism seems to be the weakest framework of solidarity as it is a new ideology in the Middle East and is not deep rooted in the society relatively to the other frameworks of solidarity. Therefore, tribalism, ethnicity, sectarianism can challenge nationalism, and it is testified by the many ethnic, religious, sectarian and tribal conflicts in the area, which destabilize the nation-states in the region.²

Tribalism, Sectarianism, Ethnicity and Nationalism in Iraq

Ethnicity, sectarianism and tribalism are deeply rooted in Iraqi society. Iraqi society can be divided into three main ethno-sectarian groups: the Sunni Arab population, which is mainly concentrated in central Iraq around Baghdad, especially between Baghdad and

¹ Baram, "Neo-Tribalism in Iraq", pp. 1-31.

² Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner, "Introduction: Tribes and the Complexities of State Formation in the Middle East", in Khoury and Kostiner (ed.), Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East, pp. 1-22.

Joseph Kostiner, "Transforming Dualities", pp. 226-251.

Patricia Crone, "Tribes and States in the Middle East", Journal of the Royal Asian Society, Volume 3, 1993, pp. 371-373.

Gurr, pp. 151-177, 276-277.

Gellner, Muslim Society, pp. 57-58.

Christine Jungen, "Tribalism in Kerak: Past Memories, Present Realities", in George Joffé Jordan in Transition, 1990-2000 (London: Hurst and Company, 2002), pp. 191-207.

Mosul; the Shi'ites, who are almost entirely Arab and are mainly concentrated in southern Iraq; and the Kurds, who are almost entirely Sunnis, and mainly concentrated in northern Iraq, in the mountainous area of Kurdistan, which extends into Iran, Syria, Turkey and Azerbaijan. A large proportion of those groups were organized into tribal units during the time dealt with in this study.

During the period between 1920 and 1958, Iraq was ruled by a Sunni Arab government with minor representation of the other two ethno-sectarian groups. The Sunni Arab political elite promoted its own ethno-sectarian group, which constituted around 20% of the population of Iraq, and discriminated against the other groups, especially the Shi'ites, who constituted the majority of Iraq's population (around 55%). As a result, the Shi'ites became frustrated and demanded more participation in state politics and the bureaucracy, while the Kurds, who constituted 14%-18% of Iraq's population, demanded a measure of autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan or even independence. The demands of the Shi'ites and Kurds were not accepted and the ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq developed: the Shi'ites became better educated and more eager to achieve a share in government and the bureaucracy, while the Kurds developed their own ethno-national movement. That situation created tensions between the different groups and hindered the development of Iraqi national solidarity.

Another problem hindered national solidarity was the attitude of the Sunni Arab political elite towards Iraqi nationalism. The Sunni Arab political elite fostered pan-Arabism rather than Iraqi nationalism in order to use it for legitimating their control over the other

ethnic and religious groups, as the Sunni Arabs constitute the vast majority of the population in the Arab sphere. The result was alienation of the Kurds, who did not consider themselves as Arabs, and arousing suspicions among the Shi'ites, who feared pan-Arabism would legitimize Sunni Arab dominance over them.

As modernization took place, the struggle between Shi'ites and Sunnis for control of the country intensified, as a result of the spread of education and growing urbanization among the Shi'ites, especially among the members of the tribes living in the tribal village periphery. At the same time, the Kurds developed their own national movement, in which the educated Kurdish middle class played important role in crystallising it.

New political organizations reflected the ethnic and religious tensions, and it can be observed especially in the fifties that Sunni Arabs tended to support the pan-Arab organizations, while the Shi'ites tended to support the Iraqi Communist Party, which opposed pan-Arab unity. At the same time, the Kurds established their National organizations, and the most important one was the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).

Tribalism played an important role in the development of the ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq. The national Kurdish movement led by tribal leaders. Among the Shi'ites, the fast spread of education and urbanization, especially among the tribes, made them more enthusiastic to participate in the government and bureaucracy. Among the Sunni Arabs, nepotism based on tribal, regional and family connections became a common channel for

promotion into the higher ranks of the state machinery, and helped the Sunni Arabs preserve their dominance in state politics.

The Theoretic Model of this Study

Various scholars have presented different theories about the development of ethnic, religious and sectarian conflicts. Some of them feel they are a product of the backwardness of Third World countries which lag behind the industrialized Western World and others that they are they product of universal processes, centering around the dominance of one ethnic or religious group over a country's establishment and resources at the expense of other ethnic or religious groups.¹

This study is based on the theory of Andreas Wimmer. Wimmer, a specialist in ethnic and religious conflicts, argues that in multi-ethnic/multi-religiuos/multi-sectarian states, when one ethnic or relious group takes over the rule and discriminates against other ethnic or religious groups, political awareness of the other groups, which are discriminated against, becomes stronger, and a develops. He adds that that kind of conflict tends to occur in a state in which civic solidarity is weak. Such a conflict develops through modenization processes, espacially a spread of modern education and urbanization, as the gruops which are discriminated against, espacially the urban middle class of each group, is eager to take part in the political game in the state. The conflict, as

¹ Horowitz, pp. 96-105, 291-332.
Gurr, pp. 151-177, 276-277.
Tibi, pp. 142-144.

Wimmer says, sometimes lead to violence, and can sometimes remain in place for years without violence.¹

In states in which each ethnic, religious group or sect is prominently constituted from tribes, tribalism may play an important role in the development of the conflict. In such circumstances, the tribal leaders tend to make a dialogue with the central government. In such dialog tribal interests make a major role, rather than ethnic or religious. In a case that the dialogue between the tribal leaders and the central government does not succeed, the tribal leaders tend to join the ethnic or religious struggle in the country, and even to play a major role in this struggle. The spread of modern education and urbanization among the tribesmen lead to increase in their ethnic or religious awareness, which contributes to the development of the conflict.²

The structure of this study

This study had five chapters, each dealing with a distinct period in the relations between Sunni Arabs, Shi'ites and Kurds in Iraq and the development of Iraq as a state. The chapters are arranged chronologically and describe the phases of the development of ethnic conflict in Iraq over the years. Each period is interwoven with tribalism and ethnicity, and they influence the development of the nationalist movements which existed in Iraq, i.e. Iraqi nationalism, pan-Arab nationalism and Kurdish nationalism.

¹ Andreas Wimmer, Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict, Shadows of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 87-91, 106-113, 156-195.

² Wimmer, pp. 168-173, 185-189.

The first chapter surveys ethnic groups and sects in Iraq involved in this study before the First World War, and gives an insight into the tribes which constitutes a major part in each of them. It shows the deep historical roots of the ethnic and sectarian conflicts in Iraq. It shows that in the sixteenth century tensions between Shi'ites and Sunnis intensified because of hostility between the Safavid Persian Empire, which had adopted Shi'a Islam as its official religion, and the Sunni Ottoman Empire. The tensions continued into the 19th century following the development of the Iraqi Shi'ite holy cities, especially Najaf and Karbala, which were accompanied by the growing intervention of Shi'ite clerics of Iranian extraction and by the massive conversion of Sunni tribes in southern Iraq to Shi'a, which lasted from the end of the eighteenth century until the first half of the nineteenth. Nevertheless, at the turn of the twentieth century, hostility decreased, as Pan-Islamism has been promoted by Shi'ites and Sunnis, especially by the Ottoman sultan, 'Abd al-Hamīd. It followed the adoption of a relatively more conciliatory attitude on the part of Shi'ite and Sunni clerics, who called for the unification of Islamic forces in the face of the threat that the West would take over the area, which increased as the First World War approached. At the same time, at the end of the nineteenth century Kurdish nationalism started to develop in Kurdistan around their common language, culture, history and territory. Most influenced by the growing modern nationalist movements in the Balkans, whose ideas infiltrated the Kurdish tribal regions were well-educated urban Kurds.

The second chapter covers the period from the British occupation of Iraq during the First World War and to the British mandate, that is, from 1914 to 1920. It was a period during

which Iraq, which had previously been composed of three separate Ottoman districts, began its development as one administrative unit under British rule. During that period, the organizational and bureaucratic infrastructure of the Iraqi state was shaped in both the cities and the periphery. The relatively conciliatory atmosphere between Sunnis and Shi'ites continued to prevail, and was fully expressed in the revolt of 1920, which began as a local tribal rebellion against the British and escalated into a revolt throughout most of Iraq. It entailed substantial Shi'ite-Sunni cooperation, especially in Baghdad. During that period the Kurdish nationalist movement continued to develop, mainly because of the intensive international discussions regarding the future of Kurdistan area. Sheikh Mahmoud Barzanji attempted to create an autonomous, overtly tribal Kurdish state in the region of Sulaimaniya, but his attempts were repressed by the British.

The third chapter covers the British mandate in Iraq, that is, from 1920 to 1932. During that period, the Sunni Arabs, under British aegis, gained dominance in the administration of the Iraqi state and its resources, leading to an increase in Shi'ite-Sunni tensions. However, since British relations with the heads of the Shi'ite tribes were good, the protest was mitigated, especially among the Shi'ite clerics, whose status had been affected after the initiation of the mandate. At the same time, the Kurds, who tend to dislike the fact that Sunni Arabs were administrating Kurdish districts and restricting them culturally, tend to demand autonomy. Sheikh Mahmoud Barzanji tried to lead a Kurdish tribal struggle for autonomy or for a Kurdish state which he would head, but the attempt ended in failure. Furthermore, some well-educated Kurds established national associations in

the cities which contributed to the dissemination of Kurdish nationalism among the Kurds and solidified the movement.

The fourth chapter covers the end of British mandate to the fall of the Rashid ‘Āli al-Kaylāni's government, that is, from 1932 to 1941. During that period, the Sunni Arab political elite entrenched its power, the military gained enormous power over Iraqi society and politics, and there was a rapid spread of education and urbanization. The revolts of Shi‘ite tribes in southern Iraq, which the Sunni regime mercilessly suppressed, increased Shi‘ite-Sunni tensions. As for the Kurds, the mullah Mustafa Barzani and his brother were working towards local tribal autonomy, while in the cities national Kurdish associations continued to be formed, contributing to the solidification of the Kurdish national movement and the dissemination of its ideas.

The fifth chapter covers the the period from 1941 to 1958. During that period, the struggle between Shi‘ites and Sunnis for control of the country intensified, as a result of the spread of education and growing urbanization among the Shi‘ites, especially among the members of the tribes living in the tribal village periphery. The Shi‘ites became increasingly eager to take part in the country’s political life. At the same time, the Kurdish national movement developed around tribal leadership: mullah Mustafa Barzani established himself as the movement’s leader and the Kurds racked up significant achievements. The Kurds established both a national party (KDP) consisting of tribal leaders and well-educated urban individuals, and the Republic of Kurdistan in the Iraqi province of Mahabad, where Barzani and his supporters operated with Iranian Kurds.