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Case Study: Corruption in Iraq

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The growing problem of corruption in Iraq is intimately connected to the impotence of the current government and the enduring ethnic conflict the state experiences today. This paper views this issue through a historical comparison informed by European history and relevant political theories. Building on a theoretical framework composed of history, political science and cultural criticism, this paper will compare the experiences of present day Iraq to those of the former Yugoslavia. I argue that the story of Yugoslavia is helpful to understand the internal conflicts of Iraq and further, that the comparative model I will employ brings into question the fundamental capabilities of the modern nation-state.

At the very root of this conflict is the structure of the modern nation-state. As historian Andrew Bergerson explains, the power of the nation-state is expressed as a monopoly on violence and taxation, the goal of which is to create and preserve centralized power.¹ The ideal, European nation-state, perhaps like France, would also reflect a homogeneous population in accordance with its single authority. This homogeneity is imaginary, however, and the language and practices of the dominant culture, often embraced as “national” culture, become part and parcel of the governing itself. Subordinate cultures are forced to abide by dominating mores, and their practices are frequently devalued and discriminated against. Moreover, as Kristin Ross notes, “When modernization has run its course, national subjectivity takes the place of class,” and, in effect, ethnicity comes to replace class as the basis of national culture.² The modern nation-state in some ways depends on this tension in order to function (disenfranchised groups are useful for cheap labor and a growing economy, for example), but when ethnic differences become the basis for political affiliation in a multi-ethnic state (particularly as a result of political upheaval), a process of decay begins which threatens the life of the superstructure.

Demography is one factor in this process. Ethnic unmixing--the geographical separation of ethnic groups--is a common response to governmental disorder. Of his research on migration following the collapse

1 Bergerson, Andrew. Public Lecture, University of Missouri-Kansas City. 12 November 2007.

2 Ross, Kirstin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*. Boston: MIT Press, 1995. p. 149.

of the Habsburg, Ottoman and Hungarian empires, historian Rogers Brubaker notes that “in the protracted course of post-imperial unmixings, the phases of greatest intensity have for the most part been closely linked to actual or threatened violence, especially during or immediately after wars.”³ While the identity crisis associated with political collapse often reinforces ethnic identification and solidarity, the factors that influence ethnic migration after such political turmoil are complex. Brubaker mentions “rootedness” of the new minority, “anticipated and actual policies of the successor states toward the minority,” “availability and quality of resettlement opportunities,” and “‘voice’ as an alternative to ‘exit’,” as factors in ethnic mobility.⁴

Similarly, political scientist Miles Kahler employs economist Albert Hirschman’s concepts of voice, the extent to which citizens can participate in their government, and exit, the propensity of a population to leave a group, in his work on decolonization as a means to explain public reaction to political failure. He writes, “Failure for the party leaders thus acquires two meanings: in the case of exit, the unsuccessful leaders have few followers or inactive ones; in the case of voice, the leaders face rebellion or replacement.”⁵ While Kahler uses these terms in the context of loyalty to political parties, they are also useful to explore loyalty to the state itself. When the nation-state fails to provide mechanisms for voice over exit, the threat of succession or civil war arises. Geographic mobility, which typically only fortifies pre-existing ethnic regions, ensues and amounts to political mobility, with each new boundary erected between ethnic groups acting also as a political boundary. Such fragmentation paralyzes the state’s functioning as a whole. These unmixings are common to distressed states and typically reflect ethnicity as an intensified form of political identity.

Brubaker cites Yugoslavia as a helpful example. The five major ethnic groups represented in Yugoslavia--Serbians, Croats, Montenegrins, Macedonians and Slovenes--had independent national histories and approximate territories. Josip Broz Tito, the Socialist Party’s general-secretary in Yugoslavia in 1937 and president from 1953 to 1980, acknowledged Yugoslavia’s different ethnic groups and their territories but also attempted to form a collective “socialist Yugoslavian consciousness.”⁶ This tension reached a head during the global protests of the summer of, as Yugoslavia’s minority populations protested their

3 Brubaker, Rogers. “Aftermaths of Empire and the Unmixing of Peoples.” *After Empire: Multi-Ethnic Societies and Nation-Building*. Eds. Karen Barkey and Mark Von Hagen. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997. 167-68.

4 Ibid. 167.

5 Kahler, Miles. *Decolonization in Britain and France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press., 1984. 85.

6 Pavković, Aleksander. *The Fragmentation of Yugoslavia: Nationalism and War in the Balkans*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000. 62.

oppression under the dominant cultures of the different nations within the state along side the protests that occurred between the five dominant ethnic groups. In fact, Muslim protest even spurred a new wave of underground Serbian nationalism. While nationalist movements like that of the Serbs remained secretive because of the heavy hand of the socialist government, which eradicated threats to peaceful socialism, political resolutions in the coming years made almost certain the demise of the forced harmony of nations under Tito's rule.

A new Yugoslav constitution drafted in 1974 gave the ethnic groups more autonomy in the form of a semi-confederation. It also set up a governing body which, following the death of President-for-life Tito, rotated the presidency between the nations each year. This new model forced aspiring politicians to identify with their ethnic group as a path to political power, lending further strength to nationalist movements which, after the death of Tito in 1980, became less secretive. The result was the near eradication of non-ethnic political voice. In 1988, Slobodan Milosevic began to openly organize and promote Serbian nationalism, and in 1990 Dr. Franjo Tudjman, a genocide apologist, was elected president of Croatia. The disintegration of the USSR in 1989 dealt a moral blow to socialists worldwide, and at the same time in Yugoslavia power moved from the hands of the centralized socialist union to the diverse hands of the local population whose cultivated differences undermined their ability to cooperate. Croatians and Slovenes fought to withdraw as autonomous states while Serbians and Montenegrins pushed to retain the Yugoslav state. When Bosnia-Herzegovina decided to secede as well, the predominantly Serbian Yugoslav army advanced in an effort to reverse the proceedings.

The official combat between the territories in the early 1990s is less important for this argument than the ethnic violence that took place within each. In these divided territories, dominant ethnic groups battled to maintain majority rule as their subordinate counterparts fought to save their ethnic identity. The Serbians in what remained of Yugoslavia helped to finance, arm and feed Bosnian Serbs who fought in Bosnia against secessionist non-Serbs in an effort not only to gain political control of the territory but also to render it more Serbian ethnically. When the centralized, bureaucratic powers of the socialist government fell with the death of its leader and the collapse of other states in the region, the restructuring and consequent bids for political power by the remaining Yugoslavs, with a Serbian majority, were organized and fueled by ethnic identity. The result is a project on the part of each group to both "reaffirm the sovereignty of 'its' nation over the territory that was claimed for it" and creating within that territory an ethnically homogeneous nation.⁷

7 Pavković, Aleksander. *The Fragmentation of Yugoslavia: Nationalism and War in the Balkans*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. 97.

The 'national' identity of Yugoslavia was only espoused by the Serbs, who understood it as an extension of Serbian identity and who stood to gain more political control with its preservation. The cycle of cultural violence and ethnic unmixing continued, ensuring the demise of Yugoslavia, and today each nation is a separate state.

The causes, characteristics and consequences of the breakup of Yugoslavia can in many respects be used a model for understanding ethnic conflicts in the modern nation-state. The fragmentation reflects the state's inability to maintain a monopoly on violence and taxation in a centralized government during the tumult of political transition caused by the disintegration of centralized power and organized by ethnic nationalism. While the previous oppressive and centralized ruling body suppressed ethnic nationalism, it also reinforced ethnic identity. This identification quickly becomes the vehicle for political participation in the transitional period after the change of authority. The multi-ethnic state, once it begins to make formal political organization based on ethnic identity, can hardly reverse the influence of such affiliations and their subsequent bids for cultural dominance. The ensuing ethnic unmixing and violence are inherent in the collapse of a modern multi-ethnic state and, I contend, are ultimately insurmountable to the project of modern multi-ethnic nation-building.

Consider the case of present day Iraq. The ethnic combat occurring today is the result of social structures and policies similar to this model. When the Ba'ath Party successfully seized power in 1968, its platform promoted secular modernization, military strength and Pan-Arabism.⁸ During the next decade and a half, Iraqi foreign and domestic policy quadrupled oil revenues and used the money to build a strong military and also crucial infrastructure like roads and schools. Pan-Arabist sentiment was the outcome of Arab resentment of British colonization and the political power of the West and advocated the political alliance of Arab peoples. This unification, of course, did not include the ethnic Kurds living in Iraq, a mostly Muslim group whose heritage was different than Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites. When Saddam Hussein, in a Stalin-like move, usurped his mentor, Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, in 1979, ethnic differences, though not officially legislated, came to be a driving factor in domestic politics.

Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim, shortly after taking power purged the Ba'ath Party of dissidents and replaced them with loyal Sunnis. Though Sunnis constitute a majority of Muslims worldwide, they are the minority in Iraq. The CIA World Factbook estimates that Sunnis make up only 32%-37% of the population.⁹ Though the Iraqi government

8 *PRI: The World*. "The History of Iraq: Part II The Rise of Saddam Hussein." Ed. Jeb Sharp. 12 February 2003. <<<http://www.theworld.org/?q=node/5554>>>.

9 CIA World Factbook. Accessed 7 December 2007. <<<https://www.cia.gov/>>>

was not explicitly ethnically based, Hussein filled its offices with those of his own affiliation, a move that can be traced back to his adolescence. Hussein came of age living with his politically active uncle in Tikrit, a town whose social structure was influential to the future president. Historian Phebe Marr explains, “Tikrit in those days was tribally organized. Tribal values, tribal clan life was really at the core of how, not only how you organized yourself but how you identified.”¹⁰ Having grown up feeling strong ties to local community and ethnicity, Hussein brought these inclinations with him to Baghdad.

What resulted from his presidency was increased tension between politically dominant Sunnis and disenfranchised Shiites. In addition, in the name of Pan-Arabism, the Kurdish peoples of Iraq became a target of violence. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Hussein implemented anti-Kurdish policies and began directly attacking their region between 1988 and 1991 in a campaign called *Anfal*. Hussein ordered massive air attacks, using chemical weapons, and decimated approximately 4,500 villages, killing as many as 100,000 Kurds.¹¹ During this time, thousands of Kurds were deported to the southern reaches of Iraq in an attempt to dilute their 1991 uprising. At this point, the United Nations stepped in to create a Safe Zone under which the Kurds lived in relatively peaceful, functioning democracy until Hussein’s ouster in 2003. Since 2003, however, the ethnic cleansing and discrimination rampant in Hussein’s Iraq have not been forgotten by either Iraqis or their American occupiers.

When American forces deposed Hussein and subsequently aimed to build a new government, they purged all government offices of Ba’athists, loyal ideologues and passive technocrats alike.¹² Americans relegated the responsibility of drafting a new constitution and building a new government largely to the Shiite Muslims, only reinforcing the ethnic hostility nurtured in Hussein’s Iraq. Meanwhile, a class of newly unemployed and disenfranchised Sunni Muslims turned militant against the American occupation and against their Shiite and Kurdish supporters. In turn, a wave of Shiite militant groups formed to address the Sunni violence. This violence begat classic ethnic unmixing, as towns and whole regions began to be identifiable as Sunni, Shiite or Kurdish strongholds. Conditions such as these severely complicate the process of

library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>>.

10 Marr, Phebe. *PRI: The World*. “History of Iraq: Part II The Rise of Saddam Hussein.” Ed. Jeb Sharp. 12 February 2003. <<<http://www.theworld.org/?q=node/5554>>>.

11 Bull, Bartle Breese. “Will the Kurds go Home?” *The New York Times*. 9 June 2004. Accessed 8 December 2007. <<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9902E1DD1630F93AA35755C0A9629C8B63>>>.

12 Wong, Edward. “Mayhem in Iraq is Starting to Look like Civil War.” *The New York Times*. 5 December 2004. Accessed 7 December 2007. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/05/weekinreview/05wong.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&oref=slogin>>.

building a new and unified Iraqi republic.

The latest blow to this process has been recent reports of mass corruption in the Iraqi government. As Damien Cave reports in a recent *New York Times* article, among Iraqi and American officials, “there is a growing sense that, even as security has improved, Iraq has slipped into new depths of lawlessness.”¹³ Stolen government property can now be found on the black market selling at inflated prices, as well as drugs and medications. With estimates of unemployment reaching 40%, \$500 bribes become the only way to secure a government job. Corruption in Iraq ranges from top to bottom, from a profit-directed enterprise to a method of survival. What the unceasing pilfering more clearly demonstrates, however, is the lack of confidence in the Shiite-led democratic nation-state. One Shiite tribal leader quoted in the article offered an analogy: “It’s a very large meal,” he claimed, “and everyone wants to eat.” Whether such consumption is the product of famine or gluttony, the corruption it entails constitutes one more hurdle to the legitimacy of the struggling government.

In addition, the undermining of traditional economy only nourishes Iraqi ethnic conflict. Cave notes, “Some American officials estimate that as much as a third of what they spend on Iraqi contracts and grants end up unaccounted for or stolen, with a portion going to Shiite or Sunni militias.” In this sense, American aid sponsors both the struggling legitimacy of the current Iraqi government and the violent campaigns of sectarian violence that seek to undermine it. This process of corruption both begins and ends with disbelief in the current government’s ability to govern.

In sum, the situation in Iraq reflects the model of ethnic conflict and the collapse of the modern nation-state elucidated above. While Hussein’s government, centralized and oppressive, was able to keep a monopoly on violence that ensured their power over a unified whole, the leader’s removal and the dispersal of power brought to the fore the latent ethnic conflict fostered in the previous regime. The pattern of suppressing ethnic nationalism while reinforcing ethnic identity as a necessary form of political participation was continued by the American plan to turn the bulk of power over to the Shiite majority. Further, the subsequent cycle of ethnic violence and unmixing is evidenced in the acknowledged areas of dominance of Sunni or Shiite militias. Hussein’s effort to disperse the Kurds throughout Iraq correctly anticipated that their mixing with Sunni and Shiite populations would weaken their ability to fight back and stall any attempt at secession. That process is being reversed today, another reflection of the new central government’s inability to monopolize the violence that produces ethnic unmixing. The corruption

¹³ Cave, Damien. “Nonstop Theft and Bribery Stagger Iraq.” *The New York Times*. 2 December 2007. A1, A14.

in Iraq is simply another indicator of the nation-state's decay into ethnic identity, conflict and unmixing in which the category "Iraqi" holds less and less meaning. Given these similarities to the fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia, it is reasonable to expect a similar outcome. It is further interesting to note that ethnic tension and territory disputes still plague the former Yugoslav states today. The February 2008 declaration of independence by Kosovo (a predominantly ethnic Albanian region of Serbia which has been under UN control since 1999) has resulted in protests and rioting by Serbian nationalists, a call for new Serbian elections and has jeopardized Serbia's entry into the European Union.¹⁴ Once acknowledged, ethnic identity and unmixing do not simply fade with time. Similarly, in Iraq, although recent estimates chart sectarian violence at a new low, a recent article by CNN reporter Joe Sterling suggests that one reason for this decline may be "because of the demographic shifts that have made mixed neighborhoods either all Shiite or all Sunni."¹⁵ With unmixing complete in some areas of Iraq, the recent calming of ethnic violence may only be a sleeping lion.

What can be gleaned from this comparison is either the absolute incompatibility of different ethnic groups in one state or the fundamental dysfunction of the modern nation-state. I argue the latter, that the fits and starts of Iraq are best interpreted as the death-rattle of political modernity. The last fifty years has seen the collapse of empires, like the Soviet Union, the death of multi-ethnic nation-states, like Yugoslavia, and the consolidation of sovereign states under the umbrella of supra-national governing bodies, like the European Union. The ideal modern nation-state does not exist and cannot exist given the inequities it wreaks against a diverse human population. The racial and ethnic conflicts defined by social modernity find expression in the political modernity of the nation-state. As monopolies on violence and taxation are undermined by the globalized world in which we live, the anachronistic methods of governing multi-ethnic nation-states in line with these modern imperatives are increasingly ineffective and ill-directed. Iraq is a prime example of the inadequacies of political modernity and the necessity of a new, post-modern political structure.

14 "Serb PM dissolves government." [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/03/08/serbia.ap/index.html?iref=newssearch), 8 Mar 2008. Accessed 14 Mar 2008. <<http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/03/08/serbia.ap/index.html?iref=newssearch>>

15 Sterling, Joe. "Some progress in Iraq's powder keg a year after surge." [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/02/22/iraq.surge/index.html#cnnSTCText), 22Feb 2008. Accessed 14 Mar 2008. <<http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/02/22/iraq.surge/index.html#cnnSTCText>>.