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ABSTRACT

(Under the direction of Cemil Aydin)

This thesis traces the emergence of official American perceptions of Shi’a sectarianism in Iraq and identifies the transition point when American diplomats and intelligence analysts began to perceive the Iraqi Shi’a as a threat to American interests in the region. Two factors shaped these perceptions: First, a lack of knowledge and mistaken understanding of Iraqi Shi’a communities and political dissident movements among the American diplomatic and intelligence communities contributed to a false equivalence of Iraqi Shi’a dissidence as purely religious when its goals were largely political in nature. Second, these misperceptions regarding internal Iraqi society allowed external factors, such as the Cold War and the Iranian Revolution, to play a disproportionate role in shaping official American perceptions of Iraqi Shi’a sectarianism.
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<td>CDF</td>
<td>Central Decimal Files</td>
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<td>CFPF</td>
<td>Central Foreign Policy Files</td>
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<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
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<td>CP MD</td>
<td>College Park, Maryland</td>
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<td>DESP</td>
<td>Despatch</td>
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<td>DoS</td>
<td>Department of State</td>
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<td>EMBTEL</td>
<td>Embassy Telegram</td>
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<td>FRUS</td>
<td>Foreign Relations of the United States</td>
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<td>ICP</td>
<td>Iraqi Communist Party</td>
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<td>MEMCON</td>
<td>Memorandum of Conversation</td>
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<td>NARA</td>
<td>National Archives and Records Administration</td>
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<td>RG</td>
<td>Record Group</td>
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<td>TEL</td>
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<td>TELCON</td>
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<td>USSR</td>
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, THEORY, AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

During a 2016 interview with *The Atlantic*, when asked about the situation in the Middle East, American President Barrack Obama stated, “You’ve got countries that have very few civic traditions, so that as autocratic regimes start fraying, the only organizing principles are sectarian.”\(^1\) With this statement, President Obama reinforced the role of sectarian divisions in the minds of *The Atlantic’s* readership and displayed a paradigm through which he understood the Middle East. President Obama is hardly alone in his understanding of sectarian organization as a primary social factor in the Middle East. Indeed the oversimplified binary of Sunni versus Shi’a religious traditions is reflected throughout American research, diplomatic, and policy efforts in the region. However, the sectarian paradigm ignores, disregards, and downplays other types of identity that exist, often unacknowledged, and disregards alternative reasons for conflict. This is especially true in Iraq. Iraqis have historically embraced both ethnic and national forms of identity, and surges of seemingly sectarian conflict are often the product of political, not religious, exigencies. Yet the Sunni-Shi’a divide influences recent American diplomatic understandings of Iraqi history and the paradigm through which current events are interpreted.

The eruption of sectarian violence in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003 generated a multitude of new scholarly investigations and insights. Kalil Osman, Fanar Haddad, Danny

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Postel and Nader Hashimi have specifically investigated sectarian identity formation in Iraq.\(^2\) Other academics such as Vali Nasser, Juan Cole, and Sabrina Mervin have pursued questions of broader Shi’a role in geopolitics in the Arab world.\(^3\) Similarly, there is no lack of scholarly attention devoted to the relationship between Iraq and the United States, given the tortured relationship between the two.\(^4\) The American-Iraqi relationship is a rollercoaster of cautious optimism, abrogated diplomatic relations, military and economic aid, and assistance in a regional war, culminating in two American invasions with an interregnum of punishing sanctions.

For all the scholarly attention devoted to American-Iraqi relations and Shi’a political efforts, no studies specifically examine how American diplomats perceived Shi’a sectarianism in Iraq. In initiating this foray, I trace the emergence of American perceptions of Shi’a sectarianism in Iraq and identify the transition point when American diplomats began to perceive Iraqi Shi’a as a threat to American interests in the region. I contend that two factors shaped these perceptions: First, a lack of knowledge and mistaken American understanding of Iraqi Shi’a communities and political dissident movements contributed to a false equivalence of Iraqi Shi’a dissidence as purely religious when its goals were largely political in nature. Second, these misperceptions regarding internal Iraqi society allowed external factors to play a


disproportionate role in shaping American perceptions of Iraqi Shi’a sectarianism, especially during the Iranian Revolution.

This paper begins by examining the historiography of Iraq that denies Sunni-Shi’a conflict in Iraq as primordial or inevitable and identifies political and economic contingencies affecting sectarian relations. The historiography also disabuses notions of Shi’a sectarianism as divisive within Iraq, yet a source of unity among Shi’a across the Iran-Iraq border. Building upon previous scholarly efforts that question the Iraqi sectarian divide and refocusing seemingly sectarian conflict on other causal factors, I then turn my attention to the process through which American diplomats increasingly equated Shi’a identity with political dissent. Implicit within this process is American diplomats disregard or devaluation of competing means of identity for those identified as “Shi’a.” Thus American diplomats decreasingly identified Shi’a as Iraqi, or Arabs. Instead, American reports originating from 1958 to 1979 increasingly emphasize sectarian identities and ignored alternatives based on nationality or ethnicity. This tendency proved especially true during times of political turmoil in neighboring Iran and peaked during the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

In the late 1950s, when Iraqi revolutionaries deposed the Iraqi monarchy and established a new government, American diplomats were aware of sectarian differences within Iraqi society, but overlooked Iraqi Shi’a while focusing on regional strategic concerns, such as the spread of communism, despite the Shi’a’s majority status among the Iraqi population. From the early 1960s to mid-1970s, American diplomats reported on limited Shi’a dissidence but disregarded Iraqi Shi’a political demands as religious and sectarian in nature, unaware of degree of political organization taking place among part of the Shi’a community in southern Iraq. Overwhelmingly, American analysis from this period was preoccupied with maintaining access to oil, countering
the Soviets, and cautiously monitoring Egyptian President Gamal Nasser’s growing influence in the region. By misattributing Iraqi Shi’a political organization as to religious reasons, American diplomats missed the nascent political movement occurring among elements of the Iraqi Shi’a population. Thus when the social turmoil proceeding the Iranian Revolution occurred, American diplomats feared that the seemingly sudden dissidence among Iraqi Shi’a was a result of Iranian interference, Iraqi Shi’a identification with the political movement in Iran, or a contagion affect through a homogenous trans-border Shi’a body. In actuality, the Shi’a political dissidence and increased levels of violence were the logical outgrowth of indigenous Shi’a political organization occurring over the previous twenty years. American diplomats’ fears of trans-border Shi’a solidarity undermining Iraqi stability crystalized in 1979 during the Iranian Revolution, which undermined numerous American strategic goals in the region, and brought about the trauma of the Iranian hostage crisis, which left American policy makers impotent against Revolutionary Iran for over a year.

Documents archived by the United States Department of State and intelligence agencies depict changing American diplomatic priorities, concerns, and efforts abroad. Drawing upon these resources, I trace diplomatic cables, intelligence estimates, and other reports to understand how and why American diplomatic perceptions of Shi’a Iraqis developed from 1958 to 1979. To demonstrate American misperceptions of Iraqi Shi’a communities and political organizations, I contrast my primary sources with number of excellent scholarly works documenting the rise of the Shi’a political Islamist movements in Iraq. This contrast demonstrates the gap between American diplomats’ analysis of Shi’a dissent as motivated by religious sensibilities and the actual political nature of Shi’a dissent. American diplomats were unaware of the growing Shi’a political movement identified in in the secondary literature. These errors eventually contributed
to a false equivalency between Iraqi Shi’a dissidence and the revolutionary movement among Iranian Shi’a.

**A Theory of Sectarianism**

Brian R. Wilson, in a theoretical study of modern sectarianism, defines “sect” as “likely to comprise only a very small proportion of a society’s total membership” whose adherents are “divergent in doctrine, practice, social ethos and form of socialization.” While Iraqi Shi’a comprise a majority of the population in Iraq, Shia are a significant minority among Muslims, and Shi’a orthodoxy and orthopraxy significantly diverge from Sunni norms, thus the Shi’a are recognized as a sect within the Islamic tradition. Wilson’s static definition of sectarian identity, while a helpful starting point, fails to fully articulate the role of group identity in sectarianism.

Here Ali al-Wardi, a prominent Iraqi sociologist, is useful: “sectarianism is not a religious [form of belonging], rather it is a form of tribal belong to a sect or particular person. When a sectarian person expresses solidarity to a sect he does not concern himself with the moral and spiritual principles of that sect .. all that concerns him is loyalty to the group and enmity to the other.” In the pages that follow, I suggests that this sense of belonging and group identity articulated by al-Wardi are not fully reflected by Iraqi Shi’a during the period of study, from 1958 to 1979.

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6 Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat Ijtima’iyya min Tarikh al-Iraq al-Hadeeth* (Social Aspects from Iraq’s Modern History) quoted from Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, pg 25 for accuracy of translation. For more information on Ali al-Wardi, a prominent Iraqi Shi’a sociologist, see Orit Bashkin “Advice from the Past: Ali al-Wardi on Literature and Society” in *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*. For a conversation between American diplomats and al-Wardi, see American Embassy, Baghdad, to Department of State (DoS), telegram (tel) #A-1008, 16JUN64, SOC 2 IRAQ, Box 3226, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland (CP MD).
Further exploration into the theory of sectarianism emphasizes the fluid and contextual nature of group identities.  

Both definitions above treat sect as definite and immutable. However, Fanar Haddad’s recent work offers a new theoretical approach for understanding the varied dynamics of sectarian identity in Iraq. Haddad rejects two opposed but common approaches to understanding sectarian identity in Iraq: the Iraqi nationalist approach that denies sectarian tensions and the American or European understanding that equates sectarian differences with insurmountable conflict. Instead, Haddad argues, sectarian identity in Iraq is fluid, constructed and constantly under negotiation with outside factors. He identifies sectarian identity in Iraq as belonging in one of three categories: assertive, passive, and banal. These categories exist along a spectrum and offer a “barometer … of the salience of sectarian identity.” First, Haddad articulates assertive sectarianism as active displays or embracing a sectarian identity without referencing the sectarian “other.” Within assertive sectarianism there exists aggressive sectarianism or a display of sectarian identity accompanied by blatant attacks or animosity towards the sectarian “other.” Second, passive sectarianism only identifies with the sectarian identity when contextually provoked, such as by social obligations towards religious observations. Passive sectarianism contains apologetic sectarianism in which a person is uncomfortable or hesitant to display a sectarian identity. Third, banal sectarianism is that latent form of sectarian identity that is not actively expressed. Haddad argues that Iraqis, both Sunni and Shi‘a, move along the spectrum, 

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7 For greater detail on the terms “sect” and “sectarian” in context of the Middle East, see Fanar Haddad, “‘Sectarianism’ and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East.” Middle East Journal, Volume 71, No. 3, Summer 2017.

8 Haddad, Sectarianism in Iraq, 25.
embracing different notions of sectarianism in response to external factors, though banal sectarianism often proved dominant in Iraq.⁹

In Iraq, Shia identity was often mobilized and negotiated not in conflict with strict adherents to Sunni Islam, but with the Iraqi state. Nader Hashimi and Danny Postel contend that authoritarian states seek legitimacy and survival by “manipulating social and political cleavages via a divide-and-rule strategy.”¹⁰ The Iraqi state often discredited Shi‘a political grievances and complaints of discrimination by dismissing Shi‘a detractors as *shu‘ubiya*, a charge of Iranian and Persian loyalty contrary to Arab solidarity and identity, or the intersection “where racial fears came together with sectarian animus.”¹¹ The Iraqi state forced its Shi‘a citizens to defend their Arab identity, but Sunni Iraqis did not undergo a similar process. Moreover, in Haddad’s articulation, the Iraqi state embraced Sunni symbolism that directly countered symbols embraced by Shi‘a Iraqis, with both sets of symbols centered on differing historical traditions and heroic figures.¹² Shi‘a Iraqi sectarian identity was thus provoked by the state while the state simultaneously forbid expressions of sectarian identity.¹³ These dynamics, of the Iraqi state provoking responses of sectarian identity, are illustrated in the pages ahead.

Finally, before moving to historiography, a note on the term “Iraqi Shi‘a” serves as a valuable preliminary to this discussion. The unexamined replication of this term obscures deeper nuances of identity in Iraq. “Iraqi Shi‘a,” while frequently employed as a useful category of analysis, within both this work and others, is inherently inaccurate. This term emphasizes a

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¹⁰ Hashemi and Postel, *Sectarianization*, 8-10.


¹² Ibid., 33-40.

¹³ Ibid., 33.
homogenous sectarian identity, while disregarding national and ethnic forms of identity that exist alongside sectarianism as a salient means of group identification. I chose to employ the phrase “Iraqi Shi’a” as shorthand to avoid bulky phrases while discussing American perceptions of sectarian categories in Iraq. However, it is necessary to distinguish between categories of analysis versus categories of practice: “Iraqi Shi’a” as a category of analysis reflects my sources and the American perceptions of Iraqi Shi’a as the object of my analysis. Nonetheless, I recognize that “Iraqi Shi’a” is not a category of practice and acknowledge the limitations and disadvantages of the term. I consciously include indicators of both national and sectarian identity as an implicit reminder of competing forms of identity available to the denizens of Iraq and am attentive to the heterodox nature of Iraqi society.  

The broad use of Iraqi Shi’a as a category implies notions of group unity in thought and action, a concept that undermines the agency and personal motivations possessed by individual Iraqi men and women. Diversity and divisions did and do exist within the Iraqi Shi’a population. For example, the Shi’a communities’ response to class and socioeconomic differences resulted in division over communist ideology. Disenfranchised Iraqi Shi’a youth often embraced communism as an antidote to social, economic, and political ills, but the older, religious generation generally rejected communism due to its secular orientation. This distinction resulted in varied levels of support to the Iraqi government among the Shi’a

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15 For a more comprehensive coverage of this topic, see Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Franke, The Arab Shi’a: the Forgotten Muslims (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 21-26.

population. Moreover, Shi‘a communities debated and disagreed upon theological issues. Ayatollah Khalisi’s denouncement of traditional differences between Sunni and Shi‘a rituals of worship, in an effort to encourage inter-sectarian relations, prompted widespread disagreement among leaders in the Iraqi Shi‘a community. This controversy later resulted in physical violence between the differing parties.

The History of Sectarianism in Iraq

This work joins that of scholars who de-emphasize commonly held beliefs of both the inevitability of Sunni-Shi‘a conflict on sectarian grounds within Iraq and the inherent connectivity and loyalty between Iraqi and Iranian Shi‘a communities. The relationship between Iraqi and Iranian Shi‘a is a matter of debate among scholars of Iraqi and Islamic history. Scholars such as Abbas Kelidar argue that tribes in what is now Iraq converted to Shi‘ism beginning in the eighteenth century, leading to a long period of Shi‘a relations across Ottoman and Persian imperial boundaries. Most scholars, including Yitzhak Nakash and Hanna Batatu, however, contend that most of the Arab tribes in Iraq that converted to Shi‘a Islam did so in the nineteenth century simultaneous with a transition from a nomadic to an agricultural lifestyle. This social transition brought the nomadic Arab tribes into contact with the Shi‘a elite residing in Karbala and Najaf, both home to the shrines of Shi‘a saints and venerated by Shi‘a faithful. The later development of Shi‘a religiosity and rituals in Iraq allowed expressions of Shi‘a faith to develop independent of those in Iran and limited trans-border ties of shared sectarian faith. Nakash draws

17 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel #A-452, 29OCT62, 787.00/10-2962, Box 2085, Central Decimal File (CDF) 1960-1963, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

18 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, despatch (desp) #245 & #634, 6OCT55 & 16JUN55 respectively, 887.413/10-655 & 887.413/6-1655, Box 4962, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

on differences in Iraqi and Iranian Shi’a interactions with the state, religious education in the
madrasa, burial practices, and financial support of shrine cities to demonstrate the differences
between these forms of Shi’ism, which created separate traditions, loyalties, and organizational
forms in both Iran and Iraq.\(^{20}\)

In Iraq, Sunni and Shi’a differences were significantly exacerbated by Ottoman and
British colonial rule. Historian Khalil Osman locates the origins of Sunni-Shi’a sectarian
tensions in the creation of the modern Iraqi nation state under the British Mandate. British
colonial administrators built upon the legacy of the Ottoman Empire by favoring the urban Sunni
elite as local leaders, even in predominately Shi’a areas, provoking complaints and frustration
among the Shi’a majority during the early years of the Mandate.\(^{21}\) Iraqi Shi’a tribes later
instigated and fought in the 1920 Iraqi Revolution against the British. The British quelled the
Iraqi Revolution at the direct cost of over 40 million pounds and thousands of casualties.\(^{22}\) These
costs translated into a loss of political capital at home for the British population struggling to
recover in the wake of World War I. Consequently, the Iraqi Shi’a did not endear themselves to
their colonial overseers. King Faisal, installed as the Iraqi king after an abortive rule in Syria,
acknowledged the need to create a unified Iraqi identity, but was unwilling or unable to
relinquish the Sunni monopoly on power within the British administered mandate.\(^{23}\) This process


\(^{21}\) Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 69.


\(^{23}\) Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 70.
of state building under the mandate system prevented “sectarian solidarities from congealing into a seamless Iraqi national identity.”

While Osman is correct regarding the absence of a “seamless” Iraqi national identity, many scholars argue for the existence of an Iraqi national identity throughout the 20th century. Reidar Visser allows for the existence of sectarian notions, but argues that there existed an overarching sense of Iraqi nationalism and desire for unity in Iraq. He traces Iraqi intellectual history during the 1920s and documents frequent references to ideals of Iraqi unity in political discourse almost a century ago. Visser concludes by arguing that sectarianism in Iraq exists, but is frequently overstated by those in and outside the region, while the history of Iraqi nationalism, incorporating both Sunni and Shi’a, is often overlooked. Hanna Batatu references the chaos surrounding the World Wars as instrumental in developing a sense of Iraqi national community among Sunni, Shi’a, and Kurdish Iraqis. Finally, Fanar Hadad argues that challenge for an Iraqi national identity in Iraq was due to a multiplicity of notions of Iraqi nationality, not an absence of national identity.

Other historians of Iraq take a conjunctural approach to articulate outside factors, primarily those involving economic and social changes, which influence seemingly sectarian divides. In his seminal work, The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq,

24 Ibid., 49.


27 Haddad, Sectarianism in Iraq, 32-35.

28 I am indebted to Faleh Abd al-Jabar for creating the category “conjunctural approach” to describe the scholars discussed below. Faleh Abd al-Jabar, The Shi’ite Movement in Iraq (London: Saqi, 2003).
Hanna Batatu analyzed British and Iraqi archives during the 1960s and 1970s. Batatu takes a Weberian and Marxist approach to class, and in doing so, provides additional clarity on the question of Sunni and Shi’a division. The revolutions and coups that took place in 1958 and 1963 disrupted structures of power and class, exacerbating socioeconomic differences between Sunni and Shi’at.

Iraqi Shi’a often self-identified as “underdogs” in Iraqi society, which was as much a result of economic and political factors as it was of sectarian division. Batatu concludes, “the picture was much less simple than a purely sectarian interpretation would suppose.”

Class and economic disparities map onto the Sunni-Shi’a landscape opaquely, clouding the difference between sectarian and class division.

Marion Farouk Sluglett and Peter Sluglett offer a similar argument with a geographic approach. Iraqi Shi’a generally originated from the tribes of Southern Iraq, a traditionally poor, rural area. As they migrated to economic opportunities in Baghdad, they created Shi’a slums and began to comprise the majority of the urban poor, segregated along spatial bounds from both established Sunnis communities and financially successful Shi’a. Sunni Arabs have enjoyed

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29 Hanna Batatu, The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq, 807.
30 Ibid., 983.
31 Ibid., 985.
32 Naderi, Shia Geopolitics and Political Islam in the Middle East, 237-238, 263. Many historians of colonial rule find the roots of sectarianism, or ethnic violence, in the colonial “divide and rule” approach. For a similar approach to the colonial roots of sectarianism in Lebanon see Ussama Samir Makdisi The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-century Ottoman Lebanon (Berkeley: University of California Press 2000). Mark Farha argues that Makdisi overstates the colonial origins of sectarian divisions and claims that “only a nuanced analysis blending considerations of past and present confessional ideologies and class interests, as well as political instrumentalization of sectarian identity by both external and internal actors, may allow us to better comprehend the vigor of communalism in the present day.” (“Searching for Sectarianism in the Arab Spring: Colonial Conspiracy or Indigenous Instinct?” The Muslim World, 106:1, January 2016, 8-61).
greater economic opportunity, thus creating divisions between the economically successful and the extremely poor that are easily misunderstood as sectarian in nature.\textsuperscript{33}

Ultimately, Iraqi Shi’a embraced leftists politics, unions, and communism as an antidote to their general disenfranchisement and vigorously resisted the secular, amoral nature of communist in favor of traditional Islamic beliefs. Iraqi Shi’a were adverse potential Iraqi membership in the United Arab Republic, led by Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, which would undermine their status as an Iraqi majority and embraced Arab nationalism as an inclusive, post-colonial identity. Iraqi Shi’a embraced the antagonistic poles listed above, and fell on a spectrum between the two. In short, Iraqi Shi’a were anything but monolithic. Simple notions or popular concepts of loyalty or conflict based upon sect alone are disproven by co-determinate social factors and differing historical traditions. Sectarian division within Iraq and trans-border connections on confessional grounds are historically and politically contingent, not an inherent consequence of differences or similarities of theology.


In 1957, the United States Congress passed a resolution to provide military and economic assistance to countries across the Middle East. The details of the resolution, later known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, endeavored to accomplish the following American strategic objectives: continued access to oil imports, prevent Soviet influence into Middle Eastern countries, decrease the appeal of communism, deflate the appeal of the non-alignment movement which peaked in the mid-1950s at the Bandung Conference, and decrease growing Arab nationalism led by Egyptian President Gamal Nasser. While the Eisenhower Doctrine included a number of aims, the primary American goal was to prevent Soviet control over oil trade in the Middle East. The Eisenhower Doctrine lays the foundation for the American approach, goals, and outlook in Iraq during the following period.

The year 1958 brought about a revolution in Iraq, altering both internal relations between the Iraqi state and its citizens and external relations among Iraq and its neighbors. While pre-1958 frustrations with the Iraqi monarchy and prime minister are beyond the scope of this paper, the Revolution of July 14, 1958 is a transition point in Iraqi history. The coup of Abd al-Karim Qasim demolished the Iraqi monarchy, established by Great Britain, and with it, the vestiges of western control in Iraq. After the Revolution, Qasim’s government established relationships with China and the Soviet Union, rejecting the tradition of British and Western influence in Iraq.

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35 Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, Iraq Since 1958, 50.
For this reason, the Revolution serves as a logical starting point for evaluating American diplomatic perceptions of Iraqi Shi’a sectarianism. Qasim and his cabal of Free Officers swept to power accompanied by the hope and optimism of lower and middle class Iraqis, Sunni and Shi’a alike. Not only was Qasim the son of mixed Sunni-Shi’a parentage, but he also promised improvements for the working and lower classes, significant advantages to the economically disenfranchised Shi’a.36

American diplomatic cables evaluating the July Revolution focus on the political, regional, and international implications of the event and do not mention Iraqi Shi’a or sectarianism more specifically.37 Thus American diplomatic cables demonstrated a lack of preoccupation with the Shi’a population and no perceptions of the Shi’a as a significant dissident group, even during a time of great political instability. Nevertheless, the focus of diplomatic cables is still telling. These documents provide insights into American interests in the region, American understanding of Iraqi society, and provide a baseline from which to evaluate future changes in American perceptions of Iraqi Shi’a.

American diplomats and analysts in the embassy in Baghdad and consul in Basra were fully aware of the Shi’a element of Iraqi society. In the mid-1950s, American diplomat composed reports on Shi’a observations of Muharram, a singularly Shi’a religious holiday, efforts of a Shi’a cleric to unify Iraqis from both Sunni and Shi’a backgrounds, and included the

36 Batatu, The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq, 778, table 41-2, 836-847.
sectarian identifications in a report on political prisoners.\textsuperscript{38} American diplomats, did not, identify the Iraqi Shi’a as a significant political force.

Qasim was not a true communist. Early in his rule, he commanded significant support from the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) but distanced himself from the party as he solidified his leadership in Iraq. Qasim halted the ICPs independent efforts and extended his personal political control over Iraq through a vast patronage network.\textsuperscript{39} American diplomats in Baghdad, however, preoccupied themselves with Qasim’s link to communism. Congruent with the Eisenhower Doctrine, a majority of the cables from Qasim’s reign locate Iraq and the American-Iraqi relationship squarely within the Cold War binary, with the United States primarily focused on little beyond the role of communism within Iraq. American assessment repeatedly reference Qasim’s relationship with the ICP, and the alternately waxing and waning relationship between Iraq and the Soviet Union, and evaluate the influence of communist elements within Iraqi society. Less than a year after the Qasim Revolution, intelligence analysts assessed that a “creeping communist takeover” was taking place in Iraq which would soon become a “hidden satellite” of the Soviet Union, and had likely passed the “point of no return.”\textsuperscript{40} At a National Security Council meeting in April 1959, Vice President Nixon asked the Assistant Secretary of State, William Roundtree, if the United States could tolerate a satellite Soviet state in Iraq, which Roundtree answered in the negative. Another representative from the Department of State

\textsuperscript{38} For an American diplomatic report on Shi’a observation of Muharram, see American Consulate, Basra to DoS, desp. #13, 6SEP55, 787.00/9-655, Box 3796, CDF 1955-59, RG 59, NARA, CP MD. For Ayatollah Khalisi’s efforts to unify Sunni and Shia Iraqi Muslims see American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, desp. #245 & #634, 6OCT55 & 16JUN55 respectively, 887.413/10-655 & 887.413/6-1655, Box 4962, CDF 1955-1959, RG 59, NARA, CP MD. For the inclusion of sectarian identity for political prisoners, see American Consulate, Basra to DoS, desp. #13, 10SEP57, 787.00/9-1057, Box 3797, CDF 1955-59, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

\textsuperscript{39} Charles Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq} (Cambridge. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 177.

\textsuperscript{40} American Embassy, Baghdad Office Memorandum, 29APR59, 787.00/4-2959, Box 3800, CDF 1955-59, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
reinforced Roundtree by comparing the situation in Iraq to the communist takeover occurring in Indochina.  

In addition to communism, the United States was especially concerned with the impact of Egyptian President Gamal Nasser’s influence in Iraq. Nasser led the Arab world toward the non-alignment movement that rejected the poles of American and Soviet leadership. In 1958, Egypt and Syria united to create the United Arab Republic (UAR), which dramatically increased Nasser’s influence in the region. American official’s early assessment of the Qasim Revolution attributed the coup to pro-Nasserist forces, though Qasim never aligned Iraq with Nasser’s UAR or fully embraced the Egyptian president’s leadership in the Arab world. A Special Intelligence Estimate further predicted “Nasser will seek by all means at his disposal to bring about a counterrevolution in Iraq.” On February 12, 1960, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Allen Dulles briefed that many Iraqis believed their country to be at a decision point between communism and Nasserism. Similar to fears of communism, a Special National Intelligence Estimate warned that if capable, Nasser would implement further controls over oil resources in Arab lands. The American intelligence and diplomatic apparatus assessed that Iraq was torn between communist and Nasserist elements with the communist ideology enjoying a slight advantage. Nasser’s growing leadership in the Arab world and Iraqi interest in the pan-Arab

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41 The White House, Memorandum of Conversation (MEMCON), 17APR59, 787.00/4-1759, Box 3800, CDF 1955-59, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
42 Yaqub, Containing Arab Nationalism, 182.
43 FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, document 110, “Briefing Notes by the Director of Central Intelligence Agency Dulles”, 14JUL58.
movement embodied by the UAR triggered apprehension among elements of the Shi’a community. Many Iraqi Shi’a embraced Iraqi nationalism, while rejecting the pan-Arab movement.\textsuperscript{47} Iraqi Shi’a feared that Iraqi acceptance into the UAR or a similar majority Sunni pan-Arab state would undermine their majority status in Iraq and further diminish their limited political advantage.\textsuperscript{48}

While American diplomatic records demonstrate a lack of concern with Shi‘a resistance or unrest during Qasim’s early years. Cables do reference dissident movements in Iraq with the Kurds receiving the greatest attention.\textsuperscript{49} The Kurds, who generally inhabit northern Iraq, had agitated for varying degrees of autonomy or independence since the creation of the modern Iraqi state. Ongoing Kurdish frustrations with Iraqi rule allowed those inimical to Iraq to identify the Kurds as an ideal proxy force, and the Soviet Union occasionally instigated unrest among the Kurds to influence and destabilize Iraqi politics.\textsuperscript{50}

Iran, too, meddled in Iraqi affairs through the Kurds, not the Shi’a, calling into question assumptions of trans-border Shi’a solidarity.\textsuperscript{51} The absence of Iranian interference in Iraqi

\textsuperscript{47} Iraqi nationalism, especially among Shia Arabs and non-Arab minorities, is a matter of debate among academics. Hala Fattah successfully contends there was widespread sense of Iraqi nationalism during the Iraqi monarchy that overwhelmed other forms of identity, including those sectarian in nature. See “What did it mean to be Iraqi during the Monarchy” published in Jordi Tejel et al., \textit{Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges}, (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2012). Also see Magnus T. Bernhardsson, “Digging the Past – Historiography of Archaeology in Iraq” in the same volume for a study of Ba’athist efforts to use Mesopotamian history to further of Iraqi nationalism and create a sense of history predating the Iraqi state.


\textsuperscript{48} FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, document 142, “Memorandum from the Director of Intelligence and Research (Cummings) to Secretary of State Dulles,” 5NOV58.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

internal affairs through the Iraqi Shi’a population was not due to a lack of effort by Iranian diplomats. In January 1959, the Iranian Charge de Affairs to Iraq, Malayery, discussed Iranian efforts towards Iraqi Shi’a with the American Ambassador to Iraq. Malayery claimed close contact with Iraqi Shi’a Ayatollah Muhsin Hakim and asserted that Iraqi Shi’a were increasingly frustrated with the Qasim government. The Charge de Affairs went on to suggest that the Iraqi Shi’a needed external support from Iran.\textsuperscript{52} Iranian diplomats claim of intimacy or insight into the Iraqi Shi’a population is a trend that continues in the following decades. However, Iranian use of Kurdish, not Shi’a, proxy forces during the Qasim Regime casts doubt on both the narrative of a strong trans-border Shi’a alignment and presumed Iranian-Iraqi Shi’a loyalty on religious grounds.

A lack of Iraqi Shi’a sectarianism did not equate to internal stability and peace within the Iraqi population. A memorandum of discussion from the National Security Council references unrest among Iraqi tribes along the Syrian, Turkish, and Iranian borders and blames the Syrians and Turks for inciting instability in Iraq through tribal intermediaries.\textsuperscript{53} While the memorandum does not state the sectarian identity of the tribes, their location along the Syrian border indicates that the tribes were likely Sunni, given the Shi’a majority was located south of Baghdad or in the capital. Another report mentions a serious riot between the communist and security forces in an unnamed southern town on July 10, 1959, but sectarian identity was again unmentioned, as communist ideology proved more significant than sectarian identification.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel #G-66 19JAN59, Box 3799, CDF 1955-59, 787.00/1-159 – 787.00/4-859, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

\textsuperscript{53} FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, document 182, “Memorandum of Discussion at the 404\textsuperscript{th} Meeting of the National Security Council,” 30APR59.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., document 196, “Editorial Note” to “Synopsis of State and Intelligence Material Reported to the President,” 10-13JUL59
While the documents that focused on communism and do not mention Iraqi Shi’a explicitly, historically there exists a connection between Iraqi Shi’a and the ICP, a fact unmentioned in American reporting. The Iraqi Shi’a comprised a large proportion of the poorest and most disenfranchised members of Iraqi society. As such, communism’s promises of economic equality attracted Iraqi Shi’a, especially the younger generations, and Iraqi Shi’a comprised a significant number of ICP members. American reports identify the prevalence of unions and communist ideology in Basra, a majority Shi’a area, but draw no connections between the prevalence of Shi’a Iraqis and the communist organizations in Basra. Communism proved divisive along a generation fault line among Shi’a populations. Older Shi’a, especially religious leaders, rejected the amoral, secular elements of communism, and in January 1959, American officials penned a concerned report about the possibility of clashes between Shi’a religious leaders and communist demonstrations.

The influences of secular political ideologies including communism and Nasser’s pan-Arabism prompted an embryonic Islamic movement in Iraq. Various sources offer conflicting dates and narratives for the origins of Hezb al-Da’wa al-Islamiya or the Islamic Call party, but scholars generally agree that the party gained prevalence during the early years of Qasim’s rule. Da’wa called for a return to an Islamic form of government while rejecting growing Iraqi secularism but focused its efforts on education. Da’wa began in Najaf as an intellectual


56 American Consul, Basra, to DoS, desp. #6, 28JUL59, 787.00/7-2859, Box 3801, CDF 1955-59, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

57 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel. #2132, 21JAN59, 787.00/1-2159, Box 3799, CDF 1955-59, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

58 For the details and sources of this debate, see Joyce N. Wiley, The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi’as, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992) 31-33 and Batatu (in Cole and Keddie) pg. 191-192.
movement and only later transformed into a political party.\textsuperscript{59} Sayid al-Sadr, in conjunction with other reform oriented \textit{ulama}, or religious scholars, created and led \textit{Da‘wa} in its early years. Ayatollah al-Hakim is assessed to have given implicit consent for the creation of \textit{Da‘wa}, on the grounds that it could not have come to fruition otherwise.\textsuperscript{60} During the same period, Ayatollah al-Hakim created the \textit{Jama‘at al-Ulama} or Society of Religious Scholars to strengthen the relationship between the \textit{ulama} and the \textit{umma} or Muslim community. \textit{Jama‘at al-Ulama} provided religious instruction in addition to meeting practical needs through health and welfare services.\textsuperscript{61} By 1960, a schism had arisen between the younger \textit{ulama} involved in \textit{Da‘wa} and the senior clerics, some of whom were members of \textit{Jama‘at al-Ulama}. Ayatollah al-Hakim rejected \textit{Da‘wa} as divisive, and al-Sadr distanced himself from the organization he created.\textsuperscript{62}

Iraqi Shi‘a clerics’ resistance to secular ideologies transcended the spiritual realm and possessed a material element. Land reform efforts by the Qasim regime undermined traditional power structures and decreased financial support to Shi‘a religious seminaries and mosques in Karbala and Najaf.\textsuperscript{63} Furthermore, Qasim’s efforts towards education, development and modernization, combined with the appeal of communist organizations, undermined Iraqi religiosity and decreased the traditional influence Shi‘a religious leaders held over society.\textsuperscript{64} Shi‘a clerics created \textit{Da‘wa}, but fundamentally, its goals were socio-political, not religious or sectarian, and \textit{Da‘wa} shifted away from its focus on education and toward political engagement.

\textsuperscript{59} al-Jabar, \textit{The Shi‘ite Movement in Iraq}, 81.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 88-89, 99
\textsuperscript{61} Wiley, \textit{The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi‘as}, 34 and al-Jabar, \textit{The Shi‘ite Movement in Iraq}, 99.
\textsuperscript{62} al-Jabar, \textit{The Shi‘ite Movement in Iraq}, 87.
\textsuperscript{63} Wiley, \textit{The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi‘as}, 33.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 34.
Da‘wa drew inspiration from Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Egyptian Ikhwan al-Muslimim (Muslim Brotherhood) and later developed an alliance with the Iraqi Ikhwan al-Muslimim to work towards a unified Sunni-Shi‘a Iraqi government.65

American diplomats were unaware of Da‘wa and Jama‘at al-Ulama but knew of conservative resistance to the Qasim regime, known as the Iraqi Islamic Party. In late March, 1960 the Baghdad Embassy submitted a report on the Iraqi Islamic Party’s request for licensure and included a copy of the Party’s manifesto. Embassy staff dismissed the party as weak and unappealing to an increasingly secular society. The manifesto was described as “fuzzy” and zig-zagging.”66 A month later, a report followed, documenting the Iraqi government’s licensure denial.67 The embassy, however, missed a critical detail by assessing the party as Sunni-led. The party was supported by elements of Hezb al-Da‘wa and Ikhwan al-Muslimim. Da‘wa leaders did not seek to achieve their goals through revolutionary means, but engaged in the Iraqi political process while the American embassy remained oblivious to the Shi‘a socio-political movement taking place.68

For all of Qasim’s original promise, American diplomatic reporting soon indicated concerns about the viability and stability of his government. Qasim faced multiple coup attempts in 1959 and 1960. On November 1, 1960, in a National Intelligence Estimate, American analysis foretold that a “a coup attempt could occur at any time” - less than insightful analysis

65 Ibid., 36.
66 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, desp. #900, 26MAR60, 787.00/3-2660, Box 2083, CDF 1960-63, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
67 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, desp. #923, 4APR60, 787.00/4-460, Box 2083, CDF 1960-63, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
68 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, desp. #84, 21JUL60, 787.00/7-2160, Box 2083, CDF 1960-63, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
considering the two proceeding attempts - and gave Qasim equal odds of surviving another coup versus meeting his demise.\textsuperscript{69} In a later memorandum written in 1962, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian Affairs, James P. Grant, outlined the current political instability in Iraq under Qasim, Iraqi efforts to consolidate and centralize power, political threats facing the Iraqi government, and potential courses of action for an American response to a coup.\textsuperscript{70} In keeping with previous assessments of Qasim’s rule, Grant found no reason to mention concerns of unrest among Iraqi Shi‘a or the potential for Shi‘a political maneuvering during the chaos surrounding a coup.

During the Qasim Regime, American diplomats identified and acknowledged the Shi‘a element of Iraqi society and Shi‘a clerical resistance to secular political ideologies. They were not, however, aware of the Da‘wa Party and Shi‘a efforts to work through political methods to create a conservative, Islamic Iraq. In keeping with the goals set forth in the Eisenhower doctrine, Department of State and intelligence agencies busied themselves with understanding and reporting on the dueling influences of communism and Nasser’s aggressive brand of pan-Arabism. American analysts perceived violence between Sunni tribes and Iranian meddling through Kurdish aspirations for autonomy as threats to Iraqi political stability. During Qasim’s rule, however, American diplomats did not appraise Iraqi Shi‘a as a significant cause of dissent or a threat to Iraqi stability.

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII}, document 222, “National Intelligence Estimate, 36.2-60,” 1NOV60.


The long-expected coup occurred in 1963. Colonel Abdul Salam Arif, originally a member of Qasim’s Free Officers in 1958, overthrew Qasim and established a Ba’athist government in Iraq with the assistance of a cabal of Ba’athist and Arab nationalist leaders committed to Arab unity and pan-Arab nationalism. Colonel Arif drew support from Nasserists in Iraq and aligned himself with Nasser’s Arab nationalism, but Colonel Arif appeared especially attracted to the degree of power Nasser exercised over the Egyptian state, ideology aside.

While 1963 marks the beginning of Ba’athist Iraq, Colonel Arif devoted his efforts to self-aggrandizement in an effort to forestall future coup attempts and was less concerned with promulgating Ba’athist ideologies. President Arif led Iraq for three years before his accidental death in 1966, when his brother, Abd al-Rahman Arif was chosen to assume the presidency.

During the leadership of both Arif brothers, Sunni chauvinism proved ascendant. Abdul Salam Arif often dismissed Shi’a as shu’ubiya, denying their Arab and Iraqi identity, emplacing Iraqi Shi’a in a defensive position vis-à-vis the Iraqi state. The governmental embrace of a distinctly Sunni Arab nationalism provoked a distinctly Shi’a identity and alienated many Iraqi Shi’a who rapidly became disenfranchised with the government.


73 Ibid., 178-181.


The flurry of American reporting in the aftermath of the Arif coup reveals the same concerns and preoccupations expressed during the Qasim coup with no apparent fear of Shi’a unrest during times of Iraqi instability and political disorganization. A memorandum from the National Security Council staff regarding the coup highlighted risks posed by the Kurds to the new regime and possibilities of Soviet and Iranian interference. Despite the social and political upheaval of the coup, trends in American diplomatic concerns and perceptions established during the Qasim regime continued throughout the rule of Colonel Abdul Salam Arif and Abd al-Rahman Arif.

Iranian policy towards Iraq proved continuous despite the 1963 coup and Iran continued to meddle in Iraq through the Kurds. In northern Iraq, a Kurdish insurgency smoldered, as the Kurds continued their quest for greater autonomy. The Kurds, desperate for support from any quarter, accepted logistical and material assistance from Iran. In December 1964, Ambassador Strong telegrammed the State Department with an update and noted Kurdish sources claimed Iran was encouraging further Kurdish hostilities against the Iraqi state. The Ambassador warned Kurdish leaders to “avoid appearing as agents of others or acting in the interests of others.” Strong then notes that it would be unwise to expect the Kurds to rebuff Iranian assistance in the face of increased pressure from the Ba’athist state. The United States pressured Iran to halt its aid to the Kurds and to preserve stability in Iraq and neighboring countries, but Iran proved

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unresponsive. Desperate for assistance in the fight for autonomy from the Iraqi state, Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani contacted Ayatollah Hakim, seeking support from the Shi’a cleric. Ayatollah Hakim provided nominal assistance in the form of vocal opposition. He berated government ministers for the conflict in the Kurdish region on religious grounds but stopped short of issuing a *fatwa*, or religious degree, against the conflict as unacceptable violence between Muslims. He did not urge his followers to take any physical action against the regime or in support of the Kurds.

The Kurds were not alone in seeking assistance from Shi’a leaders. Despite reliable co-conspirators in the Kurds, Iran also attempted to recruit assistance from Iraqi Shi’a in an effort to counter growing regional Arab power. Moreover, Iranian diplomats continued to underscore their relationship, even leadership, within the Iraqi Shi’a community when meeting with American diplomats. In May 1964, during a meeting with Ambassador Strong, Mohamad Hosein Faridani the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, insisted that members of the Shi’a community approached him for political advice. Mehdi Pirasteh soon replaced Fardani as the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, when Iran recalled the latter for a position in the Foreign Ministry. Ambassador Pirasteh pursued relationships and influence with Shi’a leaders more aggressively than his predecessor had. Soon after arriving in Iraq, during his initial meeting with Ambassador

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80 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel. #A-871, 27MAR65, POL 13-3 IRAQ, Box 2339, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

81 American Embassy, Baghdad MEMCON, 30MAY64, POL 1 IRAN-IRAQ, Box 2335, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

82 American Embassy, Tehran, to DoS, tel. #A-26, 16JUL64, POL 1 IRAN-IRAQ, Box 2335, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
Strong, Pirasteh reported that Iraqi Shi’a businessmen requested his assistance in transferring money outside of Iran and “received reports daily of Shias organizing to overthrow the government.” Allegedly, Ambassador Pirasteh later visited Ayatollah Hakim and offered Iranian assistance to Iraqi Shi’a in an effort to undermine the Iraqi government. Ayatollah Hakim reported Pirasteh’s offer to the government of Iraq and staunchly rejected the offer, informing Pirasteh that “Shi’a in Iraq were Iraqis and neither wanted nor needed help from Iran.”

Iran significantly influenced American perceptions of Iraqi Shi’as. The Iranian Shah, Reza Pahlavi, was an integral American ally in the region until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. As a close ally, the Shah possessed an audience and influence with ranking American diplomatic officials and, occasionally, the President. Through this access, the Shah contributed to a misguided American understanding of connections between Iraqi and Iranian Shi’a by repeatedly informing American diplomats that he had influence over his coreligionists in Iraq. During a 1965 visit to New York, the Shah claimed that his “considerable assets in Iraq” included the Shi’a and Kurds but noted that he was not using them for his own advantage. A year later, during a meeting with the Secretary of State, the Shah claimed there existed a special connection between Iranian and Iraqi Shi’a. The Shah’s access to senior American officials and Iran’s integral role in American diplomatic efforts in the region likely gave his words disproportionate

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83 American Embassy, Baghdad to DoS, 15JUL64, POL 1 IRAN-IRAQ, Box 2335, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

84 American Embassy, Baghdad to DoS, 6AUG64, tel, #A-118, POL 15-1 IRAQ, Box 2340, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.


influence on diplomatic thoughts, even as he overstated his leverage among the Iraqi Shi’a population. Iranian efforts to recruit Iraqi Shi’a, however, proved largely unsuccessful.

A Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report produced in 1966 notes “the Iranians have attempted openly to win support among leaders of the Shi’a minority Islamic group in Iraq.”  

Despite Iranian allegation to the contrary, shared religious tenets did not inherently translate into support for Iran or Shah Reza Pahlavi’s leadership efforts in the region and in February 1966, a Shi’a cleric in Baghdad denounced the Iranian Shah and called for his ouster.  

Shi’a dissidence under the Arif regime bubbled to the surface of Iraqi society during Muharram in May 1964. A traditional Shi’a religious holiday and period of mourning for the death of Husayn, an early Shi’a leader, Muharram rituals include self-flagellation and other intense displays of sorrow. Muharram and Ashura, the 10th day of Muharram, transformed into sites of Shi’a frustration with the Sunni-dominated government. Charles Henebry, the American consul in Basra, characterized the Shi’a criticisms of the Iraqi government as sectarian in nature, a statement indicative of an overarching tendency among Americans diplomats in Iraq to categorize as actions and statements in religious terms while disregarding the political nature of protest.  

Shi’a complaints emphasized the lack of Shi’a representation in government and the increasing secularism of the Arif regime. While both of these factors contain a religious element, they are also inherently political complaints regarding the nature of the Iraqi government, a factor ignored by American diplomats. Henebry continued his telegram by claiming that the

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88 American Embassy, Tehran to DoS, 10FEB66 & 12FEB66, POL 1 IRAN-IRAQ, Box 2335, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

89 American Consul, Basra to DoS, tel. #A-115 & A116, 21MAY64 & 28MAY64, POL 13-6 IRAQ, Box 2339, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
educated and elite in Basra disregarded “fanatical,” “narrow-minded” Shi‘a dissidence and “relegate the denominations of Islam to the ash heaps of history.” He goes on to claim that the educated Basrawi “regards himself as an Iraqi, an Arab, and a Moslem – in that order.”

Later that year, an embassy report exploring “Shi‘a Discontent” concluded with a quote from Gertrude Bell, a British colonial administrator who played a significant role in forming the Iraqi state under the Mandate system. Bell wrote in 1920 of Shi‘a religious leaders “There they sit in an atmosphere which reeks of antiquity and is so thick with the dust of ages that you can’t see through it – nor can they.” The author of “Shi‘a Discontent” quickly added to Bell’s quote: “Things would not appear to have changed very much, and we are doubtful that the futility of the Shi‘a is any less today than it had been in the past.”

American reports continue to document Shi‘a political efforts to improve their lot under the largely Sunni regime but tended to dismiss their concerns. Ayatollah Hakim submitted a number of complaints to the Iraqi government, emphasizing his frustration with the lack of Shari‘a law, discrimination in state hiring in favor of Sunni applicants, and the legality of alcohol, among other complaints. Embassy staff described Hakim’s concerns as largely “reactionary” and unlikely to resonate with the educated Shi‘a class. While Ayatollah Hakim disagreed with the Iraqi government over numerous and substantial issues, he continued to work for political change through non-violent methods that recognized and reaffirmed the Iraqi state.

A year later, a Shi‘a politician, Mohammad Riza Shabibi, adopted a similar approach when he presented a memorandum to the Iraqi Council of Ministers. Shabibi decried multiple aspects of

90 Ibid.

91 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel. #A-97, 3AUG64, POL 13-3 IRAQ, Box 2339, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

92 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel. #A-863, 16APR64, POL 1 IRAQ, Box 2338, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
Iraq political life, including secularism and discrimination against the Shi’a population. Once again the Embassy staff largely disregarded Shabibi and claimed that “his influence, although real, now stems more from respect due to him as an elder statesman than from a possible role as a leader of an organized opposition, much less a potential rallying point for an underground opposition.”

Shabibi may not have been a capable of organizing or leading an underground Shi’a opposition movement, but one existed nonetheless. During the early years of the Arif regime, Da’wa members expanded their influence beyond the predominately Shi’a cities in the Iraqi south. Da’wa members proselytized in Madinat al-Thawra, an impoverished Shi’a neighborhood on the outskirts of Baghdad. Da’wa gradually grew from among the clerical class and began to resonate through student and professional circles. While Ayatollah Hakim bluntly condemned the failures of the Arif government, his overall quietism led to frustration among younger Shi’a who increasingly flocked to Da’wa to express their frustrations with both the Sunni dominated regime and the inaction of religious leaders. Furthermore, the Arif regime’s prosecution of the Iraqi Communist Party led many Shi’a formerly aligned with communism to seek political organization through Da’wa. Although American officials acknowledged the Shi’a religious leadership in southern Iraq, dissidence during Muharram, and Shi’a frustrations with the Iraqi


96 Ibid, 141.

97 Faleh Abd al-Jabar, *The Shi’ite Movement in Iraq*,
government, reports from the Embassy and Consulate indicate no awareness of underground political organizational efforts of Shi’a Iraqis through Da’wa.

Colonel Abdul Salam Arif’s fascination with Egyptian President Gamal Nasser’s leadership style and widespread support from Iraqi pan-Arab nationalists heightened American fears of the pernicious effects of spreading Nasserist ideology. On 26 May, 1964 American fears seemed realized when Iraq and Egypt agreed to form a unified political command, a move paralleled by Egypt and North Yemen. The Unified Political Command sought to create economic, military, and political unification between Iraq and Egypt, though it never came to fruition.98 The Department of Near Eastern Affairs within the State Department dispatched a telegraph the embassies in Baghdad and Tehran evaluating the possibility of a “Nasser takeover in Iraq.” The State Department assessed a full union between the two Arab neighbors as improbable, but outlined a policy requiring “watchful waiting,” observing diplomatic relations between Iraq and Egypt, and tracking the number of UAR Soldiers in Iraq.99

The American Consul in Basra quickly noted opposition among Shi’a religious leaders to the movement towards unification between Egypt and Iraq.100 Members of the Shi’a religious community were not alone in their opposition. Sunni Iraqis associated with the Muslim Brotherhood launched anti-Nasser protests and distributed pamphlets decrying Egypt’s execution of Sayid Qutb, a prominent founder and member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

98 Tripp, A History of Iraq, 178.

99 DoS to American Embassy, Baghdad, embtel# 304, 7NOV64, DEF 1-1 IRAQ, Box 1658, Subject – Numeric Files, 1964-1966, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

100 American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel. #A-118, 28MAY64, POL 7 IRAQ, Box 2338, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD. Also see American Embassy, Baghdad to DoS, tel. #978, 2JUN64 POL 1 IRAN-IRAQ, Box 2335, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
Ayatollah Muhsin Hakim banded together with Sunni Islamists in calling for Qutb’s release in the weeks before his execution.\(^1\)

American assessments during this period often overstated Sunni-Shi’a animosities and overlooked generations of Sunni-Shi’a interrelationships, intermarriages, and peaceful cooperation. Terms such as “age-old Sunni-Shi’a antipathy” and “age-old Shi’a disgruntlement” suggests an oversimplified, religious, and essentialist approach to Iraqi Arab relations.\(^2\) Not only does this paradigm overstate the animosity between Sunni and Shi’a, but it implies that Sunni Shi’a relations were predetermined and primordial due to religious differences and denies the role of political and historical contingencies.

Iraq ended diplomatic relations with the United States in 1967 due to American support for Israel during the Six Day War. American diplomats continued to produce reports on Iraq during this period and attempted to locate a coherent picture of political events in Iraq by piecing together reporting from regional newspapers, reports from allied countries with embassies in Iraq, and interviews with American citizens and foreigners visiting Iraq for business or scholarly pursuits. Embassy staff in Tehran and Beirut submitted reports on Iraq predicated on articles published by Lebanese journalist Edward Saad.\(^3\) They also interviewed an Exxon employee on economic and political developments in Iraq after his three day visit.\(^4\) Embassy staff in Amman

\(^1\) American Embassy, Baghdad to DoS, tel. #A-214, 13SEP66, POL 23-8 IRAQ, Box 2341, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

\(^2\) American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel. #A-1121, 26JUN65, SOC 12 IRAQ, Box 3226, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD and American Embassy, Baghdad, to DoS, tel. #A-577, 11DEC65, POL 1 IRAQ, Box 2338, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

\(^3\) American Embassy, Tehran to DoS, tel. #6586, 20NOV71 and American Embassy, Beirut to DoS, tel. #10233, 18NOV71, POL 2 IRAQ, Box 2381, Subject – Numeric Files, 1970-73, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

\(^4\) American Embassy, Beirut to DoS, tel. #10090, 24NOV70, POL IRAQ, Box 2381, Subject – Numeric Files, 1970-73, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
relayed impressions from an employee of the Greek embassy in Damascus.\textsuperscript{105} These disjointed methods provided Washington with more information about Iraq that it could otherwise obtain, but the inherent limitations exacerbated the lack of knowledge about social and civil factors in Iraq among analysts in the State Department and intelligence agencies.

Throughout the Arif period, American diplomats in Iraq preoccupied themselves studying Iraq’s relationship with Egypt and Nasser’s growing influence in the region. They were aware of Shi‘a dissidence and frustration with the increasingly chauvinistic Sunni government, but tended to disregard Shi‘a protests as weak, motivated by “age-old antipathies” of religion, and sect. This perception was furthered by Iranian diplomats’ repeated emphasis on Iranian influence over Iraqi Shi‘a and with an implicit claim of Shi‘a sectarian alliances superseding Iraqi national identity. Because they attributed Shi‘a dissidence to religion, American diplomats overlooked the political nature of Iraqi Shi‘a complaints. Although American diplomats noted a few political actions taken by Shi‘a leaders, including Ayatollah al-Hakim and Shabibi, notions of sectarian solidarity dominated their analysis and they remained unaware of Shi‘a political organization taking place in Iraq. This established the foundation that would lead to further misunderstandings of political organization of Iraqi Shi‘a in the future.

\textsuperscript{105} American Embassy, Amman to DoS, tel. #05607, 15DEC71, POL 2 IRAQ, Box 2381, Subject – Numeric Files, 1970-73, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.

Iraq suffered from a lack of leadership and national vision beginning with the death of President Abdul Salam Arif in 1966. After two years of weak national leadership from President Abd al-Rahman Arif, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, also a member of the Iraqi Ba’athist party, deposed President Arif in 1968 and claimed the mantle of leadership in Iraq.\(^\text{106}\) In an effort to escape the divisive Sunni chauvinism of the Arif regime and resolve sectarian differences, Ba’athist leadership embraced Iraqi nationalism. The new emphasis on Iraqi nationalism manifested itself as renewed attention to archeology and the ancient history of modern Iraq. Ba’athist leaders frequently referenced the Mesopotamian themes in political speech, connecting pre-Islamic history with modern Iraq. Connecting Iraqi nationalism to the glories of an ancient civilization allowed the Ba’athist regime to concoct a resonating political identity that superseded the recent origins of the modern Iraqi state, British influence in the region, and recent Arab divisions.\(^\text{107}\) Inclusive appeals to Mesopotamian history also incorporated minority groups such as Kurds, Assyrians, and Jews into an Iraqi national identity based on an ancient civilization, not Arab ethnicity.\(^\text{108}\)

Ba’athist leaders did not limit themselves to drawing on ancient history. As early as 1968, the Ba’athist government launched the Project for the Rewriting of History (\textit{Mashru Idat Kitabat


Political Scientist Eric Davis, in his highly regarded study of Iraqi national identity, articulates the Project as “an attempt to construct a new public sphere, including the reconstitution of political identity, the relationships of the citizen to the state and the public understanding of national heritage.”109 Through this project, among others, the Ba’athist government endeavored to consolidated power by creating a more coherent political body as compared to previous regimes. Despite rhetorical efforts for an inclusive Iraqi national identity, Iraqi Shi’a were increasingly marginalized under the Ba’athist regime.

Simultaneously, political changes occurred due to economic factors. During the 1970s, the Iraqi economy, and thus state revenues, expanded dramatically. The Iraqi government nationalized the oil industry in 1972, just as the international demand for oil exploded. Iraq’s Gross National Product doubled from 1973 to 1974, and tripled from 1972 to 1976.110 The Ba’athist government, intent on consolidating power, quickly converted economic prosperity into a greater control over civil society, primarily through two methods. First the Iraqi public sector and bureaucratic state expanded and focused on domestic development projects, creating an expansive, salaried middle class who owed their livelihood to the state. Second, the Ba’athists simultaneously enlarged the oppressive elements of state power to enforce the authoritarian aims of the state where economic incentives were inefficient or unsuccessful.111 While a number of scholars, led by Kenan Makiya, emphasize the totalitarian aspects of the Ba’athist government, Iraqi leaders utilized both carrots and sticks to increase state control over the population.112

109 Ibid., 148.


111 Ibid., see chapter 1 for far more detail on Ba’athist authoritarianism and development during the 1970s.

112 As an Iraqi expatriate fearing repercussions, Kenan Makiya published his work under the pseudonym, Samir al-Khalil, Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Makiya
In 1972, the United States resumed a tentative diplomatic relationship with Iraq by establishing an Iraq Interest Section in the Belgium Embassy. American Perceptions of Shi’a sectarianism during this period did not diverge significantly from those of the previous decade, though the Shi’a garnered slightly less attention than in the past, probably due to the diminished staff operating out of the Belgium embassy and the abolished consulate a Basra, located in the predominately Shi’a south. American diplomatic reports indicate a clear differentiation of the Shi’a in Iraqi society based on religious grounds but remained unconcerned with Shi’a unrest or dissident movements in the early and mid-1970s.

A political study on Iraq, prepared by the CIA in 1973, devotes one sentence to the Iraqi Shi’a, noting that their status as a political force in a majority Shi’a country ruled by a Sunni minority but mentions no concerns about Shi’a unrest or collusion with Iran. The same document also notes “we are not in a position to elucidate much more on Iraqi political dynamics,” a statement demonstrating the effects of the five-year break in diplomatic relations and consequent American absence in Iraq. Three years later, the CIA possessed the capability and access to compose a more detailed report. This report devoted more attention to the Shi’a,

draws on work on totalitarianism by Hannah Arendt to argue that Iraq under Ba’athist government fit the totalitarian penetration model embodied by Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. Kenan Makiya’s work is especially controversial due to his support for the American invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003. For other similar works that build on Makiya’s model, also see Samuel Helfont in State and Society in Iraq, and Joseph Sassoon, Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime, and Aaron M. Faust, The Ba’thification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein’s Totalitarianism. Achim Rohde, the scholar cited in the previous two footnotes, argues against a totalitarian penetration model of the Iraqi government through a study examining women and gender, art, and cultural production to demonstrate that the Ba’athist security state did not penetrate all elements of Iraqi society. I tend to agree with Rohde’s approach, given the existence and growth of underground Shi’a political organizations examined within this paper.


114 Ibid., document 232.
but remained largely unconcerned with their impact, claiming, “the Shiahs (sic) of Iraq today do not represent a unified movement nor even a focus of opposition to the Baath regime. Their capacity for political action is limited and even constrained by recent government ventures.”115 While the Shi’a as a whole did not participate in a unified movement, it was a source of opposition to the Ba’athist government.

A telegram from the Baghdad Interest Section, written in the interim between the reports mentioned above, dismissed any possibility of Shi’a political leadership, describing the Shi’a as “medieval” and “tribal.”116 Embassy staff used similar language to terms used to describe the Shi’a Muharram rituals during the mid-1960s, when the Shi’a were “fanatical” or “corybantic,” devoid of rationality.117 In this dismissive vein, later American reports noted that the Iraqi Shi’a held a weak position politically and lacked external support.118 While this lack of external support is factually correct, Iranian offers of support were available, but rejected, as previously discussed.

In 1964, the Iranian government expelled Ayatollah Khomeini, the future leader of post-Revolution Iran, for his rhetorical attacks on Shah Pahlavi. After departing Iran, Khomeini arrived in Najaf to a contentious relationships with Ayatollah Hakim.119 While in Najaf, in 1970, Khomeini developed and taught his doctrine of wilayat al-faqih (velayat-e faqih when translated from Persian) which articulated justification for governance by Islamic jurists, later the

116 Ibid., document 268, “Telegram From the Interests Section in Baghdad to the Department of State,” 23DEC74.
117 American Consul, Basra to DoS, tel. #A-115 & A116, 21MAY64 & 28MAY64, POL 13-6 IRAQ, Box 2339, Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF) 1964-66, RG 59, NARA, CP MD.
118 See FRUS, Iran Iraq 73-76. Pdf, document 208, 268 and 317.
119 Wiley, The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi’as, 41.
foundation for the government of revolutionary Iran after 1979. *Wilayat al-faqih* represented a significant theological innovation and proved controversial among the international Shi‘a community, including those in Najaf and Karbala, the southern Iraqi Shi‘a shrine cities.120 Many Shi‘a leaders in Iraq, including Ayatollah al-Hakim, rejected the doctrine on the grounds that it undermined traditional conservative Shi‘a theology and was not widely accepted among religiously observant Iraqi Shi‘a.121

The growing organizational, bureaucratic, and repressive power of the Ba‘athist state came down heavily on *Da‘wa* in the early 1970s. From 1972 to 1974, the Iraqi state executed five key *Da‘wa* leaders, including Sahib al-Dakhil. Simultaneously, and perhaps counterintuitively, *Da‘wa* expanded in the early 1970s, with hundreds of district committees taking root in the Baghdad area alone.122 However, by the middle of the decade the Ba‘athist state made significant gains in repressing *Da‘wa* and similar organizations. The government deported approximately 60,000 Shi‘a Iraqi’s after accusing them of being Iranian foreigners.123

As discussed earlier in the paper, Shi‘a religious identity, especially among the elite, was negotiated in contention with the government, not the Sunni observant. The Ba‘athist government exploited sectarian differences and used sectarian language to attack and undermine the Shi‘a Islamic movement. The Shi‘a movement was less religious than political. It organized around mass politics, clamoring for political change for reasons of political preference and self-interest, and a differing notion of the role of religion in politics. Many of the actions and beliefs

studied herein cannot be categorized as either religious or political, especially given Shi’a calls for a religious government is an innately political and religious demand. Nonetheless, it is mistaken to disregard Shi’a political movements as religious, or worse “sectarian” when they were also political in nature and were never in opposition to Sunni Islam. Joyce Wiley, in her study of Shi’a movements in Iraq, argues that in her reading of hundreds of documents on the origins and history of the Islamic movement, she never found “derogation of Sunniism.”\textsuperscript{124} Moreover, Shi’a political movements were not aligned with Iran and existed long before the Iranian Revolution took place. Finally, Shi’a leadership called for a unified Iraq under Islamist leadership and never voiced a preference for Iraqi federalism or an autonomous Shi’a region in the South. Shi’a Islamist leaders embraced Iraq as a nation composed of Arabs and Kurd, Sunnis and Shi’s while demanding a different form of government.\textsuperscript{125}

Sticky notions of religiosity and religious forms of political leadership aside, it is also important to recognize self-interest as a motive inspiring Shi’a political leadership, especially in the years prior to Ba’athist totalitarianism beginning in the early 1970s. The Arif regime’s nationalization practices undermined Shi’a land endowments in Southern Iraq, damaging religious donations contributed to Shi’a leaders from wealth landowners. Theologies of religious leadership aside, Shi’a ulama watched as their traditional sources of power shrunk and took action to reverse this course.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 148.

\textsuperscript{125} Of note, “Islamist” is a broad analytical category that can include any combination of religious, nationalist, anti-government, and anti-imperialist sentiment. In this period, Iraqi Islamist organizations should not be overly associated with the Islamist government that comes to power in Iran in 1979. During this time, Iraqi Islamists’ sought to undermine communism, increase their political representation, protest state repression, and codify their interpretation of Islamic rules through Iraqi laws.
American diplomats continued to perceive Iraqi Shi’a as weak and politically marginalized. Unaware of Da’wa and the Shi’a political movement, the United States mimicked a trend previously established by Iran and the Soviet Union and leveraged the Kurdish autonomy movement to destabilize Iraq. In 1974, in an effort to distract Iraq and prevent Iraqi interference in American negotiations with Egypt and Syria towards establishing peace between Israel and the surrounding Arab states, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger devised a plan to work through Iran to arm the Kurdish resistance. Strife created by the Kurds and Iran kept Baghdad focused on threats closer to home.126 The Kurds, seeking assistance in their efforts against Baghdad, attempted repeatedly to unite with the Shi’a against the Sunni-dominated Ba’athist state, but the Shi’a rebuffed Kurdish requests.127

The Iran-Iraq relationship improved significantly in 1975 with the signing of the Algiers Agreement. Through the treaty, Iran and Iraq settled ongoing border disputes and Iran agreed to halt assistance to Kurdish separatists in Iraq. While devastating for the Kurds, the Algiers Agreement led to unprecedented cooperation between Iran and Iraq until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The Agreement was popular with both Iranian and Iraqi Shi’a as it allowed Iranian pilgrims to visit Iraqi religious shrines in Karbala and Najaf, an economic boon to the largely Shi’a cities. Reciprocally, the Agreement allowed Iraqi Shi’a to visit Iranian holy cities.128 After signing the Agreement, the Iraqi government embarked on a public relations campaign,


advertising both the success of the Agreement and its popularity among the population, Sunni and Shi’a alike.\textsuperscript{129}

The American-Iraqi relationship continued to improve throughout the 1970s, despite the absence of a formal ambassador or embassy. Taking office in 1977, President Jimmy Carter prioritized improving the relationship with Iraq, among other countries, early in his tenure. In April 1977, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance submitted a memorandum to President Carter outlining the way ahead for improving diplomatic relationships with Iraq and mentioning that Iraq, too, had insinuated interest in improved diplomatic cooperation. Vance suggested working through the Egyptian Foreign minister to initiate further rapprochement.\textsuperscript{130} The following month, Under Secretary of State Philip Habib traveled to Iraq for an initial meeting with the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Sa’dun Hammadi.\textsuperscript{131}

The relationship between the Iraqi state and society changed significantly during the al-Bakr period. The state grew bureaucratically and economically, allowing the Ba’athist state to increase its security presence and eradicate numerous threats to the state, real and perceived, which took its toll on \textit{Da’wa} leadership. Nonetheless, American perceptions of Iraqi Shi’a maintained the same course previously established. American diplomats were aware of Shi’a frustration with the increasingly chauvinistic Sunni government but continued to disregard Shi’a protests as religious and indicative of sectarian tendencies, despite the specific political nature of actions taken by Shi’a leaders and the increasing authoritarianism of the Ba’athist state. Finally,

\textsuperscript{129} National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 141000ZMAR75.


\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., document 132, “Telegram from the Department of State Interest Section in Baghdad to the Department of State,” 18MAY77.
the paltry American diplomatic presence in Iraq, resuming in 1972, limited the American ability
to understand social changes taking place within the Iraqi state.
CHAPTER 5: A CONTAGION FROM IRAN? 1977-1979

Previously established American trends and interests in Iraq and the surrounding region changed dramatically beginning in 1977, largely as a result of the political uprisings in Iran that led to the Iranian Revolution and the eventual American loss of Iran as a critical ally in the Middle East. Before proceeding to this narrative, a brief background of the American alliance with Iran is useful.

During the early 1960s, President John Kennedy pressured the Iranian Shah Pahlavi towards reform and modernization, hoping to forestall a Soviet-style revolution in Iran. Kennedy alternated between rewards of aid and assistance packages, and threats of withdrawing of American support when Shan Pahlavi proved recalcitrant or hesitant. The Shah’s top down “White Revolution” yielded both significant development achievements and widespread frustration among those disenfranchised by the social changes.132 President Jimmy Carter, elected in 1976, acknowledged the role of the White Revolution in creating a schism within Iranian society and urged Shah Pahlavi to loosen his authoritarian grasp and halt the regime’s widespread human rights abuses. The social disruption engendered by the reforms, regime corruption, disaffection among religious communities, and the perception that the Shah was little more than a toady for the United States led to anti-Pahlavi protests and the Iranian Revolution of 1979.133


133 Ibid., 223-227.
Simultaneously, the United States built an alliance with Saudi Arabia. As the British withdrew from the Persian Gulf, the United States sought a new ally in the region and turned to the Saudis. Eager to expand their regional influence, the Saudis agreed to provide stability and a pro-American influence. In exchange, the United States supplied Saudi Arabia with an array of military hardware. Thriving Saudi oil revenues allowed the Kingdom to expand their defense capabilities.\textsuperscript{134} By the mid-1970, the United States was heavily invested in the dual alliances with Saudi Arabia and Iran and relied on oil exports from both countries. Of the two, Americans perceived Iran as the more congenial ally as Iran harbored no animosity toward Israel and did not participate in the 1973 oil embargo.\textsuperscript{135}

Saudi Arabia and Iran both allied themselves with the United States and received handsome rewards in return, but the similarities between the two countries were limited. The conservative House of Saud upheld Islamic piety as the self-appointed guardians of Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities for Muslims. Conversely, Iranian leaders drew ire throughout the Middle East for their friendly relationship with Israel. Independent of American alliances and foreign policy, Saudi Arabia and Iran competed for leadership in the Islamic world.\textsuperscript{136} In an effort to gain influence, Iran endeavored to build relationship with Shi‘a communities across the Middle East, as demonstrated by Ambassador Pirasteh’s efforts among the Iraqi Shi‘a community discussed above.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 144.


\textsuperscript{136} Hashemi and Postel, \textit{Sectarianization}, 11.

\textsuperscript{137} For an example of Iran’s efforts to build ties to the Shi‘a community in Lebanon, see Fouad. Ajami, \textit{The Vanished Imam: Musa Al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon}, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
In 1977, American diplomats grew truly concerned with Shi’a unrest in Iraq. This topic gradually dominated diplomatic reports from 1977 to 1979. While tensions between the Sunni government and Shi’a were not new, Americans came to believe that growing unrest in Iran could precipitate a similar movement in Iraq.

Shi’a unrest in Iraq in 1977 began with the Safar Intifada, or uprising. Despite Iraqi laws banning mass gatherings, the Shi’a ulama in Najaf organized a march from Najaf to Karbala, on February 5, 1977, to honor the martyred Imam Hussein. The march also served as a protest against the Ba’athist government and the latest round of execution of Shi’a leaders.\(^{138}\) Elements of the Iraqi Army intercepted the marchers mid-way in the small village of al-Haydariyyah but defied orders to fire on the people and rebelled, joining in the movement, probably due to the high number of Shi’a conscripts in the Iraqi Army.\(^{139}\) Later, hastily arriving Iraqi Army reinforcements with helicopter air support brutally suppressed the movement, halting the march to Karbala.\(^{140}\) The Iraqi Army arrested over 2000 people and dozens were killed. The Iraqi government referred to the event as a riot, even though the marchers were generally unarmed.\(^{141}\) Further government punishment came swiftly. In the government response, Shi’a religious organizations were dismantled, Islamic leaders fled Iraq, and Ayatollah Khomeini’s son was assassinated.\(^{142}\)

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\(^{139}\) Ibid, 52-53. For the high percentage of Shi’a conscripts in the Iraqi Army, see Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 138.

\(^{140}\) National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 190808ZFEB77 and Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi’as*, 52.

\(^{141}\) Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi’as*, 52.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 52.
On February 19, 1977, the American Iraq Interest Section in the Belgium Embassy reported receipt of a political pamphlet detailing the catastrophic march from Najaf to Karbala. The tone of the American report indicates a mixture of surprise and uncertainty in pamphlet’s details:

If claims of leaflet are true to any substantial degree, Iraqi government has a far bigger problem with Shia population than authorities will admit either publicly or privately to us via our usual source with close links to Iraqi intelligence. The very fact that such a leaflet is being circulated is a significant security lapse in a country where ownership of typewriters is tightly controlled, and overt reproduction facilities are almost non-existent.  

An American telegram sent ten days later describes the Iraqi government’s long-term response to the incident, convicting key perpetrators and sentencing them to death. The report concludes “the authorities appear to have stuffed the genii of Shia unrest back into the bottle” and later dismisses the incident as “socio-religious friction [that] was mishandled by local authorities in Najaf, [and] was then exploited by still unknown anti-regime elements” (italics mine). American diplomats’ dismissal of this incident is significant: the following year, these events on the road between Najaf and Karbala formed a foundation for the growing American concerns over Shi‘a sectarianism in Iraq. American ignorance to the indigenous Islamist movement occurring in Iraq allowed them to dismiss the incident as “socio-religious friction” in the trend of denying the political elements of Shi‘a frustration with the Ba‘athist government. It

143 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 190808ZFEB77. With regards to typewriters, Joyce Wiley notes that the pamphlets were hand printed in an effort for the movement to remain covert before it occurred, see The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi‘as, 51.

144 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 010553ZMAR77.

145 Ibid., 010553ZMAR77.
is notable that American diplomats did not speculate or assume a connection to Iranian actors, which would change in the coming months.

In addition to punishing leaders of the uprising, the Iraqi government reacted by implementing structural and personnel changes. The Chief of Iraqi Intelligence, among others, was replaced almost immediately.146 The government then moved to reorganize the Iraqi military towards a smaller, more ideologically loyal force.147 Traditionally, Shi'a conscripts comprised a majority of enlisted men in the Iraqi military, a likely explanation for soldiers’ unwillingness to fire on the Shi'a protestors marching from Najaf to Karbala.148 The military also began eliminating the small number of Shi'a officers, deemed untrustworthy due to their sectarian heritage.149

Here it is useful to refer to the theoretical understanding of sectarian identity articulated by Fanar Haddad and discussed early in the paper. Iraqi Shi'a identity was provoked and negotiated not in conflict with Sunni observants or religious leaders, as is assumed by subsuming Shi'a actions as “sectarian,” but in reaction to the government. While the government was largely dominated by Sunni Arabs, at its’ core, this conflict did not center on sectarian identity, and identities were not deployed in religious register, but a political one. The Iraqi government’s distrust and mistreatment of Iraqi Shi'a exacerbated social divisions, and drove Shi’a towards the Islamist political movement. It is inaccurate to dismiss tensions between the Iraqi government

146 Ibid., 242303ZMAR77.
147 Ibid., 060908ZAPR77.
149 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 060908ZAPR77.
and elements of the Iraqi Shi’a communities as “age-old” conflict, the very response of American diplomats in Iraq.

The Iraqi state, led by President Bakr and General Saddam Hussein, used both carrots and sticks to maintain state control over the population, Sunni, Shi’a, and Kurd alike. Late in 1977, during the Shi’a religious observance of Muharram, General Hussein capitalized on the opportunity by visiting Shi’a shrines in Najaf and Karbala, praying and meeting with Shi’a leaders. In a well-publicized address, Hussein highlighted the respect with which the Ba’ath regime treated Shi’a religious leaders and shrines. He then invoked the legacy and religious power of Shi’a forefathers, stating, “Imam Ali, Imam Hussein and the rest of the illustrious righteous leaders of Islam were not only eminent leaders of Islam but were also our own forefathers,” striking words from a Sunni Iraqi. 150 American diplomats noted Hussein’s actions as “a display of piety rare among secular Ba’athists” and attributed the solicitude to “careful diplomacy” intent on improving relations with the Iraqi Shi’a majority. 151

Notably, during times of Shi’a unrest the Iraqi state addressed Shi’a discontent by developing infrastructure, housing, and other projects to improve the standard of living in Shi’a dominated areas. 152 The Iraqi government, through their actions, professed their belief in the necessity of social programs to assuage political divides created by the Sunni-led government’s exclusion of the Shi’a from the largesse of the state. 153

150 Ibid., 060908ZAPR77.

151 Ibid., 170655ZDEC77.

152 Housing and general economic development is mentioned in National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 090010ZMAR79, and a Euphrates Dam project primarily benefiting Iraqi Shi’a is mentioned in 120917ZMAR79.

153 The Ba’athist government did not solely rely on efforts to mitigate Shi’a discontent. Hussein also appealed to shared Sunni and Shi’a religious identity (see National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State
Relative normalcy returned to Iraq in 1978, but the American Interest Section in Baghdad grew increasingly preoccupied with the Iran-Iraq relationship by the end of the year, concerned that unrest in Iran would affect the Shi’a population in Iraq. In November, American diplomats wrote of Shi’a unrest in Iran as if it were a contagion, worrying the unrest would “rub off” on religious conservatives in Iraq. They worried the infection of political unrest in Iran would spread throughout what they assumed was a homogenous trans-border Shi’a body.

Analytical discrepancies in American diplomatic reports emphasize the degree to which American perceptions of Iraqi Shi’a sectarianism were as contingent upon events taking place in Iran as they were upon events among the Iraqi Shi’a population. Diplomatic analysis evaluating the possibility of Iranian political discontent influencing Shi’a unrest in Iraq referenced the conflict between the Iraqi Army and Shi’a marchers on the road to Karbala the year prior, despite the absence of Iranian involvement. As discussed above, American analysis at the time placed blame upon the Iraqi government, not Shi’a unrest, nor Iranian influence, concluding at the time, “there is good evidence that it was the overreaction of Iraqi authorities to plans for religious processions from Najaf to Kerbala.” A year later, American diplomats associated Iraqi Shi’a unrest with Iranian influence, despite the absence of an Iranian connection and contradicting diplomatic analysis at the time of the event.

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155 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 200730ZNOV78.

156 Ibid., 170655ZDEC77.
Iraqi Shi’a began to command greater attention within the Department of State. In response to questions from Washington, the American Interest Section in Baghdad devoted an entire report to the Shi’a population of Iraq, an unusual approach for a population group that only received a paragraph at most in reports on the Iraqi political situation filed only a few years before.\textsuperscript{157} The Shi’a report, written on December 12, 1978, details Ba’athist government efforts to integrate the Shi’a into government institutions and placate religious leaders through financial support, concluding, “The Shia has evolved into a fairly successful example of conflict management and ethnic politics.” Despite the positive tone of the report, it closed by reminding readers “the fear that Shia-based politico/religious dissidence might overflow Iran into Iraq is a serious one.”\textsuperscript{158} Indigenous Iraqi Shi’a dissidence, however, already existed in Iraq.

Iranian Shi’a unrest coalesced around the religious leadership and “prophetic charisma” of Ayatollah Khomeini.\textsuperscript{159} Exiled from Iran in 1964 for inspiring dissent and denouncing Shah Reza Pahlavi’s White Revolution, Khomeini briefly visited Turkey before he settled in Najaf, Iraq. Iraqi Shi’a clerics viewed Khomeini as a rival to their leadership and disagreed with his political approach to Islam.\textsuperscript{160} Khomeini lived in Najaf until 1978, when Iraq and Iran, their relationship improved by the Algiers Agreement, jointly decided to remove Khomeini from their midst. Rejected by neighboring Arab countries, Khomeini settled in Paris in September 1978.

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\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{158} National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 121200ZDEC78.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Dustin Byrd, Ayatollah Khomeini and the Anatomy of the Islamic Revolution in Iran: Toward a Theory of Prophetic Charisma (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011).
\item \textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 10.
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where he received far greater media attention as he encouraged the Iranian opposition movement and called for Shah Pahlavi to be removed. 161

American fears of Iranian Shi’a unrest infecting Iraq increased during the first six months of 1979 during the Iranian Revolution, an uprising which removed Shah Pahlavi from power and ushered in the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, who rapidly returned to Iran from Paris. The American Interest Section in Baghdad began the year on a relatively sanguine note, however, writing on January 18:

We have already reported (Baghdad 2560) 162 that the hierarchical and political situation of the Shia in Iraq is not at all analogous to that of their co-religionaries in Iran. There are a number of major differences which tend to make the linkage between Arabs and Persians, who happen to profess the same branch of Islam, rather tenuous. Nonetheless, there is an affinity based on religion, and the Iraqi Shia can be expected to look with favor (at least) on the possibility that their lot might with an Islamic Republic next door. 163

This report is one of few references to alternative Iraqi forms of identity. The importance of ethnic Arab cohesion within Iraq, and historical conflict between Persians and Arabs was rapidly subsumed by American worries of Shi’a sectarianism transcending the Iran-Iraq border.

American concerns continued to grow in the early months of 1979 in response to turmoil in Iran. Occasionally diplomatic reports hedged their analysis, reporting that the Ba’athist regime was concerned about the spark of Shi’a unrest, begun in Iran, igniting in Iraq. 164 Other documents spoke directly to American concerns of a Shi’a dissidence. 165 In February, a State

161 Ibid., 15-16.
162 This refers to the report from 121200ZDEC78, cited in the preceding paragraph.
163 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 180600ZJAN79.
164 For example, see National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 230401ZJAN79.
165 For example, see FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XVIII, Middle East Region; Arabian Peninsula, documents 137, 35.
Department employee from the Baghdad Interest Section was dispatched to the predominately Shi’a city of Najaf, on Friday, the Muslim day of sermons and prayers, which had the potential to adopt a political tone. The employee reported no visible indication of political unrest, extra regime security efforts, political slogans, or literature recognizing Ayatollah Khomeini, as one would expect given the theological differences between Da’wa and the Ayatollah. Nonetheless, the Interest Section’s worries were not assuaged.

Warnings of infectious Shi’a unrest potentially spreading from Iran to Iraq originated in reports written in Baghdad for a State Department audience. The integration of such warnings into national level reports indicates the growth of American concerns. On June 21, 1979, the National Intelligence Estimate, a joint report written by the CIA, State Department, and National Security Agency, foretold that Iraq would likely need to use force to control Shi’a unrest. An interagency intelligence report produced by the CIA later that year also raised the specter of growing Shi’a dissidence spreading from Iran to Iraq. Notably, during this time, Saddam Hussein ruthlessly accumulated power, culminating in July 1979, when he emerged as President of Iraq upon al-Bakr’s resignation.

American diplomats possessed valid reasons for concerns, but misunderstood what was taking place across the social fabric of southern Iraq. As the historiography of Shi’a political organization demonstrates, far from importing the Iranian Revolution or yielding to the contagion of revolution spreading through a trans-border Shi’a body, during this time, Da’wa

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166 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 280900ZJAN79.
168 Ibid., document 35.
169 Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, Iraq Since 1958, 179, 206-213.
altered its tactical approach in Iraq. *Da‘wa* transitioned from educational efforts and political organization to violent methods in reaction to the abuses of the Ba‘athi government. Ayatollah al-Sadr called upon Iraqis, Sunni and Shi‘a alike to “assume a fighting position” and “save the *umma* from its present corrupt situation.”

American diplomats mistook *Da‘wa*’s efforts for Iranian influence among the Iraqi Shi‘a population. Ignorant of *Da‘wa* and the political organization occurring among the Iraqi Shi‘a population in southern Iraq, diplomatic analysis was simplistic and devoid of historical context. This allowed American diplomats to associate *Da‘wa*’s novel turn to violence with the export of the Iranian revolution, although *Da‘wa* was an entirely indigenous, political Iraqi phenomenon independent of Iran. Moreover, many Iraqi Shi‘a leaders rejected the nature of political organization occurring in Revolutionary Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini governed Iran under the principles of *wilayat al-faqih*, the theological innovation of jurist rule he established during his years in Najaf. The majority of Iraqi Shi‘a ulama rejected *wilayat al-faqih*, including the leaders of *Da‘wa* who desired an Islamic form of government, but not the rule of religious leaders articulated in *wilayat al-faqih*.

By misattributing Iraqi Shi‘a political organization as religious, American diplomats missed the nascent political movement occurring among elements of the Iraqi Shi‘a population. Thus, when the social turmoil preceding and during the Iranian Revolution occurred, American officials assumed that the seemingly sudden dissidence among Iraqi Shi‘a was a result of Iranian interference, Iraqi Shi‘a identification with the political movement in Iran, or a contagion affect through a homogenous trans-border Shi‘a body. In actuality, the Shi‘a dissidence movement and

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increased levels of violence were the result of an indigenous logical outgrowth of a Shi’a political organization occurring over the previous twenty years.

Iraqi and American concerns over Shi’a political opposition and the potential of Shi’a collusion with Iran through trans-border religious connections were significant precisely because of the Shi’a’s majority status within Iraq. Those invested in the status quo feared unrest among the Iraqi Shi‘a due to their numerical significance and the possible resonance of religious sectarianism throughout the entire Shi’a population. Iraqi Shi’a, however, were only a threat if significant mobilization created a mass movement. While Da‘wa and similar groups opposed the Iraqi state and adopted militant efforts, in 1978-1979, these movements never gained the grass-roots appeal and mobilization required to seriously threaten the viability of the Iraqi government.

American concerns of Shi’a sectarianism may have mirrored those of the Iraqi government more broadly, but it is important to note that Ba’ath party was secular in nature and found all strongly-held religious beliefs suspicious, regardless of sectarian affiliation. Drawing on Iraqi archival material acquired after 2003, Joseph Sassoon examines transcripts of meetings between Saddam Hussein and key Ba’athist advisors to demonstrate similar concerns with Wahhabism, a distinctly Sunni conservative movement that originated in the Hejaz, part of modern Saudi Arabia. In adopting Iraqi fears of Shi’s sectarianism, American diplomats failed to understand the overarching Iraqi preoccupation with all religiosity that ran counter Ba’athist secularism, an approach that was not specific to the Shi’a alone. Ba’athist leaders occasionally used religious language when seeking to mollify or manipulate the Iraqi population. Ba’athist use

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171 Shi’a comprised approximately 50-55% of the Iraqi population. Yitzhak Nakash in *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, reports 53% in 1919 and 56% in 1932. The US reports approximately 50% in 1979, National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 150448ZFEB79.

of religion as a tool of manipulation and power accumulation further exacerbated their suspicious
of religion wherever it was practiced.

The limited or absent diplomatic relationship between Iraq and the United States
inhibited a comprehensive American understanding and interpretation of events in Iraq. The
limited American diplomatic presence in Iraq undermined the network of contacts used by
Foreign Service officers and others in the Embassy to grasp the intricacies of Iraqi political and
social fabric, leaving the United States reliant on previously conceived ideas of Iraq, reports from
allies, or the few remaining Iraq contacts. Lack of diplomatic reach thus forced American
officials to fall back on long-held notions of the Shi’a role in Iraq and Iraqi politics, leading to
little change during the early years of the diplomatic embargo in the late sixties and early
seventies. By the late seventies, despite the lack of an American Embassy in Baghdad, American
diplomats, working from the Belgium Embassy, developed an interest section in Baghdad and
increased the degree of American diplomatic coverage in Iraq. However, the absence of long
term diplomatic relations, connections with local Iraqis, and thus intellectual penetration into
Iraqi society inhibited an American understanding of Iraqi political movements and social
nuance and contributed towards an oversimplification of the Iraqi Shi’a communities.

American officials often formed their opinions of Shi’a sectarianism and local political
activities based on a broad array of information provided by a number of local and regional
contacts in the government and community. Often an implicit fact of diplomatic and intelligence
efforts abroad, the identity and affiliation of local contacts can shape American perceptions that
later become codified in reports. Because Iraqi Shi’a always comprised a small minority within

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173 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 280900ZJAN79 reports of an
American diplomat dispatched to the predominately Shi’a city of Najaf to gain a better understanding of Shi’a unrest
therein. Report from 121200ZDEC78 and 180600ZJAN79 are also especially rich in detail, as compared to those
from previous years.
the government, the information Americans received regarding the Shi’a were often filtered through a Sunni mouthpiece, intent on maintaining the Sunni monopoly on power.\(^{174}\) The composition of the Iraqi government inherently colored the information the American diplomatic community could access. Furthermore, the Iraqi government was not always forthcoming with information, and the American Interest Section in Baghdad’s reports occasionally mentioned Iraqi unwillingness to discuss limits to state power and tensions with the Iraqi Shi’a population.\(^{175}\)

The lack of overarching Shi’a cohesion and collusion across the Iran-Iraq border in this period holds important implications for the role of identity in Iraq. The growing American focus on Shi’a sectarianism, and thus their religious identity, from 1958-1979 suggests an American focus on religious identity in Iraq to the neglect of ethnic and national forms of identity. While often lost to the overwhelming focus on Iraqi sectarianism, Iraqi Shi’a located their identity within the national state construct, as well as nationalist Iraqi sentiments developed during the British Mandate in Iraq and under the leadership of King Faisal.\(^{176}\) Furthermore, centuries of conflict and war between Arab and Persian empires brokered Arab and Persian identities in opposition to one another.\(^{177}\) Essentializing Iraqi Shi’a on religion alone disregarded modern histories of nationalism and empire and undermined significant aspects of Iraqi identity. Ultimately, as historian Yitzhak Nakash reminds us, Iraqi Shi’a “stressed their Arab origins and

\(^{174}\) Fuller and Franke, *The Arab Shi’a*, 95-96.

\(^{175}\) National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 190808ZFEB77 and 121200ZDEC78.


\(^{177}\) Fuller and Franke, *The Arab Shi’a*, 110.
attempted to accommodate their dual identity [Shi’a and Iraqi] within the framework of the Iraqi state.”

During 1958-1979, the Iraqi Shi’a total population did not embrace sectarianism to the
denial of ethnic and national forms of identity.

Events in Iran were not the sole influence American perceptions of Shi’a sectarianism. Shi’a Muslims comprise significant minority groups in several Gulf states in the region, including Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, key American allies and oil exporters. The 1979 Islamic Revolution and proceeding unrest in Iran prompted fears of a similar uprising among disenfranchised Shi’a in the Gulf States. In December 1978, the Kuwaiti Amir suggested to the American Ambassador that the Shi’a uprising taking place in Iran contained the potential to spread to Iraq, resulting in Shi’a demands for a greater representation in the Ba’athist government. The following month, a State Department Intelligence Summary, produced in Washington and distributed to embassies and consulates across the Middle East, suggested that the Kuwaiti Amir’s concerns arose from Shi’a criticisms of the Kuwaiti government and Shi’a unrest internal to Kuwait. Such concerns were not limited to the Kuwaitis. In October 1979, the American Ambassador in Manama reported Bahrain’s concerns with unrest in its majority Shi’a population. Local allies’ concerns about internal security and Shi’a dissent thus fed American perceptions of Shi’a unrest.

On January 2, 1979, during the unrest leading to the Iranian Revolution, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat met with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and discussed possible

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178 Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 138.

179 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 271412ZDEC78.

180 Ibid., 090023ZJAN79. Also see further related reporting by the American Ambassador to Kuwait in document 181355ZFEB79.

181 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 151130ZOCT79.
outcomes if the Shah of Iran was overthrown. Sadat stressed the urgency and immediacy of the “imminent Iran debacle” and ominously warned that the Gulf States, with their oil reserves, were especially vulnerable to Iran. Sadat then requested massive American military assistance. He suggested that Egypt donate much of their Soviet military material to African countries’ modernization efforts and receive new military hardware from the United States, comparable to that provided to Israel. He also requested a massive project to train Egyptian military officers in the United States.\textsuperscript{182} Sadat was not wrong in his assessment of the Iranian Revolution; the Shah left Iran for exile in Europe only two weeks later. However, it was in Egypt’s interest to exaggerate the dangers posed by the Iranian Revolution for the region, given the request for military assistance that immediately followed.

Furthermore, Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership aspirations were not limited to Iran alone. Khomeini sought to transcend Shi’ism and appeal to Muslims more broadly through his calls for a renewed emphasis on Islamic social justice, his rejection of imperial presence in the region, and his critique of Arab leaders allied with the West.\textsuperscript{183} Regional leaders recognized the possibility of Khomeini’s ideological appeal reaching beyond the Shi’a to affect disenfranchised Sunni, augmenting their concerns of Shi’a dissidence fueled by Khomeini.

As Sadat clearly recognized, a potential threat to American oil imports held the attention of American diplomats. In 1973, oil-producing Arab states leveraged trade as a political weapon and halted oil exports to the United States in retaliation for American support to Israel during the Yom Kippur War. The resulting oil crisis created an economic downturn in both the American

\textsuperscript{182} National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 050412ZJAN79.

\textsuperscript{183} Fuller and Franke, \textit{The Arab Shi’a}, 74.
and global economies. Thus the United States was particularly sensitive to any possibility of disturbances to the oil trade. A 1979 National Intelligence estimate noted access to adequate oil supplies as a key American goal in the Middle East and claimed that Iraq possessed both the ability and the will to undermine American access to oil. In a memorandum prepared by the CIA the same year, analysts invoked the specter of the 1973 oil crisis before discussing the possibility of Iranian Shi’a unrest infecting Iraq in context of instability in the Middle East negatively affecting American access to oil. Trans-border Shi’a unrest was thus imbued with greater strategic significance due to the connection between Iraqi stability and the American oil trade. American oil access undergirded the American economy and preoccupied politicians, especially before critical elections. The theme of American national energy policy occurred during President Carter’s State of the Union Address in 1980, and in the Republican Party Platform created before the 1981 Presidential election. It is difficult to overemphasize the degree to which American diplomats and policy makers prioritized all matters related to oil trade and access. Threats to American oil access were a top priority.

As previously discussed, American perceptions of Shi’a sectarianism cannot be divorced from the Cold War. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the diversity of Iraqi political and social fabric was subsumed by American diplomats’ overwhelming focus on Iraq’s perceived alliances

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185 *FRUS 1977-1980, Volume XVIII, Middle East Region; Arabian Peninsula*, document 137, 21JUN79.

186 Ibid., document 35,”Interagency Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency,” DEC79.

with the Soviet Union and the domestic role of the Iraqi Communist Party. During the Iranian Revolution, the loss of Shah Pahlavi, a stalwart American ally against the Soviet Union, and the domestic turmoil in Iran led American diplomats and intelligence analysts to fear the possibility of Soviet incursions and influence in revolutionary Iran. A 1979 CIA report worried that “the greatest potential for substantial Soviet gains in the near term is in Iran, where continuing serious instability could give way to a leftist regime more sympathetic to the USSR.” Concerns of trans-border Shi‘a connections and perceived Iraqi Shi‘a loyalty to Iran mapped onto broader worries regarding the spread of communism in the region.

American diplomats’ worries about Soviet influence in revolutionary Iran were unfounded. To the contrary, the Islamic movement in Iran upended the binary order of the Cold War. Through the Iranian Revolution, Islamism emerged and halted communisms’ rule as the single ideological counter to American hegemonic aspirations. Odd Arne Westad, in a study of the global nature of the Cold War, describes the Iranian Revolution as a “watershed” moment for both superpowers, undermining American and Soviet aspirations for Iran.

The ideological underpinnings of the Iranian Revolution destabilized the bipolar world, but nothing proved more traumatic, unforgettable, or definitive for future American-Iranian

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188 For instance, see FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume XII, documents 166-188, from March 26 to May 21, 1960, all discuss the ICP and the Soviet-Iraqi relationship.


relations than the Iranian hostage crisis. The hostage crisis gripped America. Walter Cronkite closed his evening news broadcast with the number of days elapsed since the hostage crisis began. Television coverage displayed the hostages’ worried parents, spouses, and children, especially during the holiday season. The Carter Administration initially hoped to resolve the crisis quickly, but as time elapsed and the Ayatollah Khomeini cemented his leadership of Iran, the hostages became a pawn between two ideologically-opposed governments, symbolic of American impotence in the face of defiant Islamism. President Carter, despite his efforts, failed to convince Iran to release the hostages or retrieve them by force, facts that contributed to his defeat in the 1980 presidential election. Similar to the salience of American access to oil after the embargo in 1973, the Iranian hostage crisis imbued Shi’a political dissidence with a sense of threatening fanaticism, exacerbating fears in Washington and among the American public.

Despite Iraqi and American fears, political turmoil in Iran failed to infect the Iraqi Shi’a population. By mid-year, the Iraqi government moved Army units away from the Shi‘a south, confident that they would not be required. The United States Interest Section was less convinced and expressed concerns of a simultaneous uprising in the Kurdish north and Shi’a south. Later in the month, however, the Interest Section reported decreased indicators of Shi’a unrest, a trend that continued throughout the rest of the year. The tumultuous year closed without a Shi’a revolt or widespread Shi’a support of Iranian revolutionary ideals.

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192 Melanie McAlister devotes a chapter to this topic in Epic Encounters, chapter 5.

193 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 112018ZJUL79 and 081047ZJUL79.

194 National Archives Central Foreign Policy Files, Department of State telegram, 240943ZJUL79.
Numerous factors, both internal and external to Iraq, influenced American diplomats’ understanding of Shi’a sectarianism in Iraq. A lack of information about the Iraqi Shi’a population and Shi’a political organization, regional allies’ concern with their own disenfranchised Shi’a populations, American worries of Shi’a unrest potentially undermining oil access, fears about Soviet encroachment in Revolutionary Iran, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the loss of a prominent and influential American ally in Shah Pahlavi all imbued the specter of Ayatollah Khomeini’s brand of Islamic revolution with a particular salience. The threat posed by the possibility of unrest spreading beyond Iran through a trans-border Iraqi Shi’a population subsumed earlier American understandings of the Iraqi Shi’a population as politically distinct from Iran and loyal to Iraq. The unrest and events surrounding the Iranian Revolution significantly altered American perceptions of Shi’a sectarianism.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Edward Said famously argued that the West constructed a version of the Orient reflecting Western approaches to culture and colonial rule and inaccurately essentialized the social, cultural, and political diversity of “oriental” lands.\(^{195}\) Inadvertently, American diplomats and intelligence analysts similarly created a mistaken understanding of Iraqi Shi’a sectarianism that reflected a variety of American strategic concerns far more than it accurately portrayed Shi’a religious or political movements within Iraq.

In *Colonialism in Question*, Fredrick Cooper examines several flaws found in historical studies of post-colonial countries and emphasizes the importance of not “reading history backwards” or misapplying presentist notions, categories, or events backwards in an ahistorical manner.\(^{196}\) There is no ignoring or denying the role of sectarianism in rupturing Iraqi society during the uprisings that occurred after the American invasion in 1991 and the civil war that followed the American invasion in 2003. Fanar Haddad argues that both of these periods significantly altered sectarian relations within Iraq.\(^{197}\) Moreover, after 2003, Iran increased its influence and control in Iraq through the use of proxy forces and the manipulation of sectarian identities. The recent, post-2003, changes in Iraqi society and Iranian influence in Iraq make Cooper’s warning of vital importance for studies of Iraqi history. It is essential for historians to

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\(^{197}\) Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, see chapters 4, 6, and 7.
proceed carefully with Iraqi history. Historians must distinguish the differences between events occurring in Iraq and the misplaced concerns of American diplomats and interrogate sources to insure that current inflamed sectarian tensions and a successfully interventionist Iranian foreign policy are not misapplied backwards onto Iraqi history.

This work demonstrates the origins of American perceptions of Shi’a sectarianism in Iraq, which crystallized during the Iranian Revolution and led to widespread concerns of Shi’a collusion with revolutionary Iran, despite a history of independent Shi’a political organization and Shi’a refusals to support Iranian interference in internal Iraqi politics. Contrary to the modern narrative emphasizing intrinsic, indigenous sectarian conflict, the study of American diplomatic and intelligence records indicates that American perceptions of Shi’a sectarianism developed in the late 1970s. Earlier American reports rarely identified the Iraqi Shi’a as a significant dissident element within Iraq, nor note consequential Iraqi Shi’a ties to Iran. It was not until the late 1970s, during the turmoil surrounding the Iranian Revolution, that American officials grew concerned of Shi’a ties to Iran. The possibility of Shi’a unrest in Iran spreading through the religious body into Iraq, exaggerated and exacerbated by local alliances and American strategic interests in the Middle East, subsumed previous American understandings of the Iraqi Shi’a. American worries decreased in late 1979 as Iraqi stability prevailed and Saddam Hussein leveraged both the Ba’athist security apparatus and appealed to Shi’a religiosity to maintain control of Iraq.

If American concerns of Shi’a sectarianism and trans-border alliances were proved unnecessary by the end of 1979, the following raises a number of questions with regard Iraqi Shi’a solidarity with Iran or Iranian leverage over Iraqi Shi’a. In September 1980, after decades of border disputes and proxy conflict, Iraq invaded Iran, precipitating an eight-year war and the
death of over a million people. Early in the war, Ayatollah Khomeini hoped for an uprising among the Shi’a in southern Iraq. With his optimistic view of the confessional bond, Khomeini reasoned that an internal uprising and external war would defeat Saddam Hussein and allow Iran to grow as a regional power. However, the anticipated revolt never occurred and historians debate whether national Iraqi or ethnic Arab ties proved stronger than sectarian loyalties or if the Ba’athist security state prevented a Shi’a uprising. 198

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