

## Book Review

Tripp, Charles, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; 357 pp; ISBN: 978052170247

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Tripp's book captures almost everything in terms of political, social and cultural life in Iraq. It explores history from the era of Ottoman empire (when Iraq was about three provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul), the British Mandate, to the Hashemite Monarchy (1932-58), then to the Republic of Iraq (1958-68) and finally the era of the dictatorship and post-Saddam era.

The book reveals how Iraqi society is a "multi-layered mosaic", comprising two main ethnicities, that is, the Arabs and the Kurds, plus some other small ethnicities such as Turkumans and Assyrians. The Arabs are also subdivided in Iraq into two sects, that is, the Shi'as and the Sunnis. These two sects have never coexisted peacefully in Iraq. Though the Sunnis, surprisingly, were too small, constituting 32 percent of Iraqi population, in comparison to the Shi'as' 64 percent, elements from the latter have always been marginalized.

Tripp's book tells the lives of the rulers and ruled in Iraq in a very nice chronological order. It tells how "the rulers have seen the state as the guarantor of their own privileges giving them the advantage over the bulk of the Iraqi population." The Iraqi state has always been a "Hobbesian Leviathan" in which a strong unified military army defined the life of a fractious population in all the periods of Iraqi history. State's internal sovereignty and survival was defined in terms of the amount of the power it had over its own population. If people could raise their voices, it was considered as the weakness of the state. Therefore, any voices other than panegyrics were to be gagged. Critical newspapers, such as *al-Abali*, were always closed down and its members imprisoned. Worse! Over 100,000 Kurds were mass-murdered in the end of the 1980s under the name of Anfal. Furthermore, chemical gas was poured on 5,000 Kurdish civilian people in Halabja, a Kurdish town on the Iraq-Iran's boarder.

Though the Sunnis (some 32 percent) constitute a very smaller groups in comparison to the Shi'as (some 64 percent), they have almost always been the hegemonic group of Iraq. In the Ottoman Empire, a Sunni-dominated system, the Sunnis had the control over most of the managerial and administrative posts while the Shi'as were largely excluded. The vestige of this inequality later colored the society of Iraq in almost all other successive regimes in Iraq until 2003. The demise of Ottoman Empire, unexpectedly, did not prove to be the end of

the Sunni domination. As they were only people to have some administrative experience and being well-equipped with administrative skills, former Ottoman Sunni officials were again restored to govern institutions under the British Mandate. Either being on power or death was asserted by the Sunnis. By their suppressive strategies and coercive measures, they could successfully marginalize all others. They dared to massacre people with impunity. The gravest example of ruthlessness of the Sunni rule was under Saddam Hussein when hundreds thousands of Shia's and Kurds were murdered for their different identity. In doing so, he used various barbaric strategies such as burring people alive and pouring chemical weapons as in the case of Halabja.

Another distinctive feature of Iraq, Tripp argues, is that those who were authoritarian in outlook were not only those in power, but also those who challenged power. Iraq was a country riven with regime change and *coup d'état*. However, the autocracy of the system has remained the same and sometimes much crueler. For example, Hikmat Sulaiman was once one of the critiques of the government and a member of *al-Abali* Newspaper group. But, as he achieved premiership with the help his old friend commander-in-chief Bakir Sidqi through the 1936 *coup d'état*, he became one of the most authoritarian leaders of the history of Iraq. Sulaiman's strong friendship with Sidqi made him purge most of the ministers and put in place people based on the whims of Sidqi. By doing so, he fully made everybody his enemy. Indeed, Sulaiman lost his title fifteen days after the demise of his friend, Bakir.

When it comes to the Kurds, Tripp argues that they have often become a subject of ethnic cleansing by the Iraqi regimes. Why? Tripp notes that the distinctive cultural and tribal identity and, more crucially, their unwillingness to submit to oppressive power, were the only sin of the Kurds: they were hated by the Arabs to an extent that sometimes foreign powers were asked to crush them such as that when Iraq was under the Hashemite Monarchy. Indeed, the Royal Air Force (British army) was brought by the Iraqi government to silence Kurdish revolt in Barzan under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani, father of the incumbent President, Masud Barzani. The Kurdish language as a symbol of ethnicity was ignored in formal places; Kurdish children were not allowed to study in their own language. Many of Kurdish cultural activities, such as *Newroz*, were banned. For instance, during the era of President Ahmad Hassan Bakir and his deputy Saddam Hussein, dozens of students of Sulaymania University and Kurdistan High School openly performing the *Newroz* feast were murdered.

The absence of a good government throughout the history of Iraq has become a question in everybody's mind, as revealed by Tripp. Looking at the psychological dimension of Iraqi leaders may shed some light. Throughout the history of Iraq, Iraqi citizens lack trust in their leaders, and none wants to be a minority. Being a minority sounded like being a criminal. Furthermore, lack of trust, has made Iraqi leaders depend highly on fear as tool of preservation of power. Iraqi leaders possibly benefited from Machiavelli's (1908 [1515]) advice for the prince. Machiavelli says "It is far better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both" (Holmes, 2004). Saddam has a famous statement, saying, "I know a traitor before he knows himself," that is why he and many of other Sunni leaders in Iraq have committed horrendous atrocities against thousands of real and imagined "enemies" to plant the seeds of fear in the minds of Iraqis. Beginning of the 1930s Bakir Sidqi as the commander-in-chief of the army was authorized to deal with a very tiny group of Assyrians as ruthlessly as he

wished. As a result, the Iraqi army slaughtered some 3,000 Assyrians and a victory celebration for that was held in the country. What is more, Saddam Hussein razed a Shi'i town Dujael with all its families to the ground, resulted in about getting 150,000 individuals killed.

US invasion of Iraq in 2003 brought the demise of the Sunni domination in the history of Iraq. Following the events of 9/11, Iraq was listed as one of the so-called "axis of evil" states by the US administration in 2003; a few months after the demise of dictatorship, Iraqis (mainly the Shi'as and the Kurds) poured onto the streets, celebrated the day believing that democracy has been exported and dictatorship and fear are gone. However, post-2003 Iraq has become the most volatile place of the world. Since then more than a million of people got killed through clashes between insurgents, Iraqi central government and occupation troops. More than 2.2 million Iraqis have fled the country because of fear of terror.<sup>1</sup> Those who were always marginalized are now the leaders of Iraq; those who were the leaders are now a marginalized class. A Kurd, Jalal Talabani, is the president of the Federal Republic of Iraq and a Shi'a, Nuri al-Maliki, is the prime minister of the country.

**Reference:**

Holmes, Alex (2004) *House of Saddam* (a film), London: BBC

International Organization for Migration (2007) *Iraq Displacement 2007 Mid-Year Review Iraq*, International Organization for Migration.

Machiavelli, Nicoló (1908 [1515]) *The Prince* Translated by W. K. Marriott, available: <http://www.constitution.org/mac/prince00.htm>