

Iraq from Monarchy to Tyranny

From the Hashemites to the Rise of Saddam



Michael Eppel

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Preface

When Saddam Husayn took total control of the government in Iraq in 1979, that country became a venue for international crises and an important focus of world attention. Iraq was involved in three wars with regional and global ramifications: the Iraq-Iran war, 1980–88, the Kuwait war, 1990–91, and the war against the United States and Great Britain in 2003. In the wars against Iran and Kuwait, Iraq was the aggressor, initiating the war. The third, when the United States and Britain initiated the action, was the culmination of a long-term crisis in the relationship with the United Nations and the United States.

The wars that Iraq initiated against Iran and Kuwait, and the suspicion that Saddam Husayn tried to develop unconventional weapons, leading to international sanctions and the war with the United States and Britain, incurred tragedy for the population of Iraq, led to the collapse of Iraqi society, and sowed destruction and blight on the Iraqi economy. Saddam Husayn's regime was one of the most despotic, cruel, and sophisticated totalitarian regimes of the modern era. It flourished under conditions unique to Iraq and the regional and global political climates and ideologies of the second half of the twentieth century.

From the time of its establishment after World War I, Iraq suffered from internal weakness, due to its many and varied population groups and external threats from its larger and stronger neighbors. The weakness of the resultant national cohesiveness combined with external threats created conditions whereby Iraq's foreign policies were aggressive and expansionist under the flag of Arab unity. Iraq's assumption of a leadership role in the Arab world and its status as a regional power in the Middle East were fueled by the innate internal weaknesses in Iraq's societal and national structure and the threats from its neighbors.

Iraq was the first Arab state, beginning in the 1930s, to foster the ideology of pan-Arabism as a means of achieving its goals in the international and regional arena and as a means for gaining legitimacy and support in its domestic political arena. Iraq was the first Arab country in which, starting in 1936, military coups occurred. Furthermore, Iraq was the only Arab country in which anti-British fervor led to a military clash with Great Britain during World War II, in 1941. Even though, for most of its existence (1921–58), Iraq

was governed by a relatively mild conservative government and enjoyed a lively political life, violent disturbances broke out in 1936, 1941, 1948, 1952, and 1956.

Between 1958 and 1968, Iraq was governed by the radical revolutionary regimes of 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and the brothers 'Abd al-Salam and 'Abd al-Rahman 'Arif. Despite the fact that they were military dictatorships, they allowed some social and political expression; they worked to develop and modernize the country—without governmental terror and without the murders that characterized the later regime of Saddam Husayn.

The political developments, based in turn on social and economic developments, that created the conditions enabling the Ba'ṯh Party to seize control of the government are examined in this book. Understanding the conditions under which Saddam Husayn rose and built his regime requires a detailed examination of the politico-social forces and conditions in Iraq. Especially critical is an examination of the fall of the constitutional monarchy that ruled after World War II and that of the radical revolutionaries who ruled from 1958 until the rise of the Ba'ṯh Party. Difficulties in developing a coherent civilian political force in Iraq, due to its multiethnic population, fraught with multiple antagonisms and conflicts, created the conditions whereby Saddam became the totalitarian ruler.

Based on extensive research, this book primarily deals with the history of Iraq between World War II and the Ba'ṯh Party's takeover of the government in 1968 and the beginning of the Saddam tyranny. The period since 1968 requires additional historical research. At the same time, in order for the reader to be able to relate to the dramatic events around and in Iraq since 1968, a general outline of Iraq's history until Saddam Husayn's fall was added in chapter 11.

A broad historical discussion entails a temptation to concentrate on historical issues that are important in and of themselves. But in this case, that would draw the book away from its central focus. Therefore, despite the tremendous temptation to pause and go into depth on the history of the Jews in Iraq and their emigration, on the developments among the Shi'ites, or on the status of women, I chose to avoid doing so. I devoted only paragraphs, isolated comments, and one subchapter to these subjects. Many studies have been written on these and other subjects, and much room remains for many more studies, but including them in this book would disrupt its flow. The reader would be drawn away from the book's central theme, a description and analysis of Iraq's political development, based on domestic social and economic circumstances and its relationship to developments in the international, regional, and global arenas. In-depth history of Iraq from the time the

Ba'ath Party took the reins of government, and especially the period of Saddam Husayn's rule, is a subject for future research.

Years of research have gone into this book, which is based on many primary and secondary sources. My primary sources were Iraqi newspapers, memoirs of Iraqi politicians, the archives in the British Public Records Office and the U.S. National Archives, official Iraqi publications, and economic and statistical data published by the United Nations and the Iraqi government. Primary material of immense importance for studying the period of the Hashemite monarchy and that of the Qasim regime can be found in the minutes of the Mahadawi trials—the revolutionary court that was established after the Qasim revolution. The rulers of the Hashemite monarchy were tried there first; later, the court tried those who opposed the revolutionary regime. The minutes are encompassed in twenty-three volumes filled with important evidence and documents from the Iraqi archives. Furthermore, I attempted to get to most secondary sources: studies, books, and articles written in Hebrew, English, Arabic, and Russian. Understandably, I was able to cover only some of the literature on the subject. Most of the chapters in the book rely on a combination of primary sources and independent research that has been done and published in the past. However, the wide range of subjects and historical issues encountered required that certain chapters rely on secondary resources and on others who have conducted research relying principally on primary resources available.

I want to thank a long list of people who helped me. Of course, all of the opinions and errors are my sole responsibility.

First, I want to thank Haggai Erlich of Tel Aviv University for his tremendous encouragement, his valuable advice, and his assistance.

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My gratitude goes to Ofra Bengio of Tel Aviv University, an expert on Iraq, from whose advice and comments I learned a lot. Similarly, I want to thank my colleagues in the Iraqi Studies Department of the University of Haifa, Noga Efrati and Ronen Zeidel, with whom I shared many discussions on important issues in the history of Iraq.

During the course of the research that led to writing this book, I consulted with experts in various fields, who assisted me in researching various aspects of Middle East history. My heartfelt thanks to Israel Gershoni of Tel Aviv University; Yehoshua Porath of Hebrew University in Jerusalem; Itamar Rabinovich and Ehud Toledano of Tel Aviv University; Menahem Rosner of Haifa University, Gad Gilbar, Kais Firro, Gabriel Warburg, Reuben Snir, Uri

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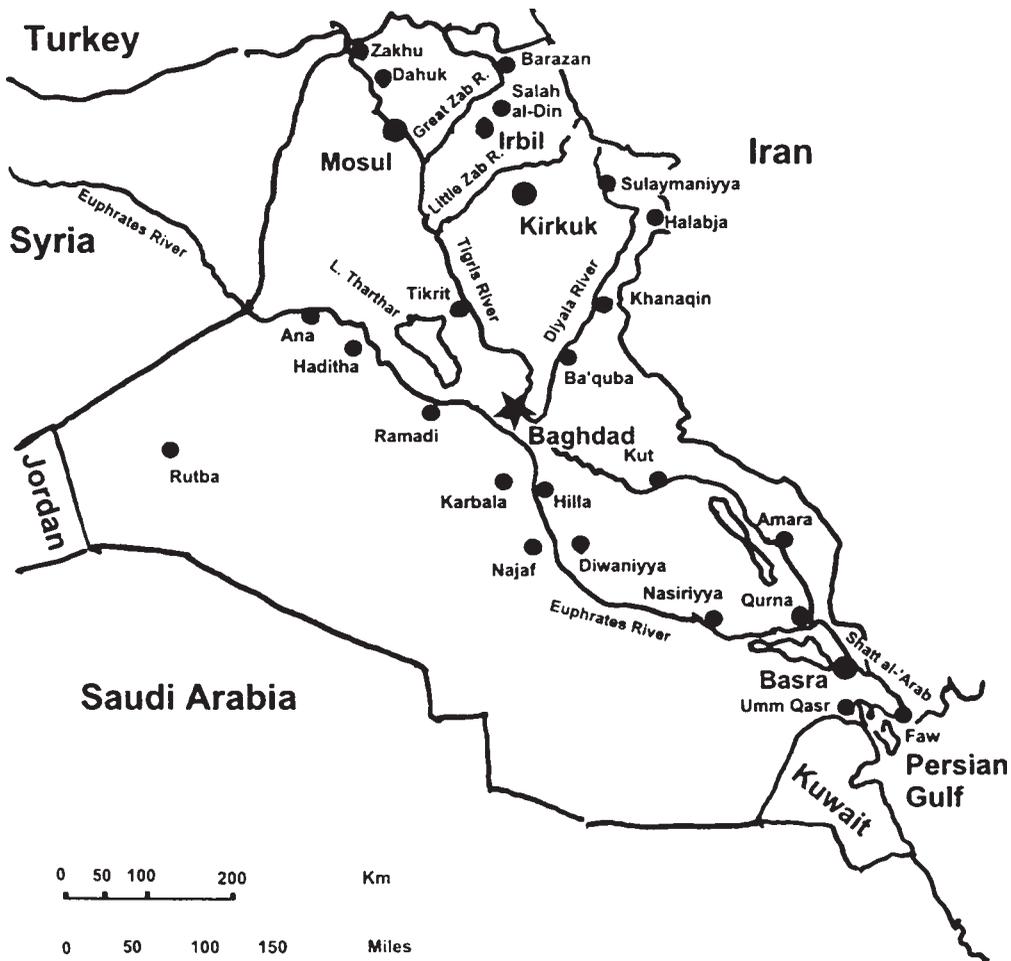
For preparing the maps, I want to thank Shai Shpiller for his assistance.

I have the pleasant duty of thanking Sharon Neeman and Marsha Brown for their devoted work in preparing and editing the English version of this book, enabling its publication.

Similarly, my gratitude to the Research Authority of Haifa University, especially to Shantal Asher, the Jewish-Arab Center in University of Haifa, and Oranim College of Education in Kiryat Tivon.

A very special thanks to my sons, Amir, Sagi, and Shai, and my wife, Tali, for their unwavering encouragement and patience throughout the process of writing this book.

This book was written with hope for all the people of the Middle East: for peace, tolerance, equality, prosperity, regional cooperation, and meaningful and good lives.



1. Iraq.



2. Shatt al-‘Arab River, Iraq’s outlet to the sea.



3. Iraq and the Kurds in the Middle East. The area marked in gray is populated by the Kurds. The composition of the Iraqi population is complex: Most of the Shi'ites living in southern and central Iraq are Arabs; the Sunnis in central and southern Iraq are also Arabs; the Kurds are mostly Sunnis, and some 300,000 Turkmen are mostly Sunnis, speak a dialect of Turkish, and live around Kirkuk.

Historical Perspective of Iraq before 1941

Mesopotamia up to the Twentieth Century

In the plains of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, in the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent, between the expanses of desert to the south and west and the lofty mountain ranges to the north and east, humankind made several of its great strides forward at the beginning of its technological and organizational political development and the advancement of written communication. Like the Nile Valley, Mesopotamia—the name given to it by the ancient Greeks—was one of the cradles of human culture. The area was known to the ancient Jews as Aram-Naharayim; the Arab and Muslim tribes of the Middle Ages called it al-‘Iraq; during the nineteenth century, it was sometimes referred to as Wadi al-Rafidain (the Valley of the Two Rivers). It was the center of the ancient kingdoms of Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria, and New Babylon. Its conquest by Alexander the Great (334–33 B.C.) linked the area with the Mediterranean basin, which became the greatest cultural center since the rise of Greece and Rome.

In the seventh century, the valley of the Euphrates and the Tigris, which had been fought over by the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanian Persian Empire, was conquered by the Arab tribes under the banner of Islam. The names of the commanders of the Arab-Muslim forces—Muthanna bin al-Kharitha, Khalid bin al-Walid, and Sa‘d bin Abi Waqqas—who conquered the area of the Euphrates and the Tigris, and the names of the battles in which the Arab Muslims vanquished the Persians (such as al-Qadisiyya) have become, in the modern era, milestones in Arab nationalist discourse in Iraq and symbols of the building of the Arab-Iraqi nation.

Admittedly, the center of the Arab Islamic Empire established under the Umayyads (661–750) was in the western part of the Fertile Crescent, and its capital was Damascus. Nonetheless, the territory now known as Iraq was of great importance to that empire. The establishment of the ‘Abbasid Empire in 750 transferred the focus of the Muslim state to central Mesopotamia. The ‘Abbasid Empire (750–1258) was basically universal Islamic in nature; al-

though it was dominated by Sunnites, other influences also prevailed within it—Shi‘ite, Persian, and (starting in the ninth century) Turkish as well. Its capital, the city of Baghdad, founded by Caliph al-Mansur (754–775), was not only the administrative and political center of the strongest and most sophisticated empire in the world at that time, but also the most important cultural, scientific, and intellectual center on Earth. The gradual deterioration and decay of the ‘Abbasid Empire, starting in the mid-ninth century, led to the neglect of the complex irrigation system and the economic decline of the area. Following the Mongol conquest in 1258, which put an end to the remnants of the ‘Abbasid Empire and razed the city of Baghdad to the ground, the area fell into a deep depression. The population between the Euphrates and the Tigris, which had numbered (according to various sources) between 8 and 16 million residents in antiquity and during the ‘Abbasid period, was reduced to less than 1 million in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. Only at the end of the twentieth century did the population of Iraq again exceed 15 million. The Mongol conquest reduced the number of residents in Baghdad, estimated at about 800,000 during the ‘Abbasid period, to less than 60,000. It took Baghdad 600 years, to the mid-nineteenth century, to again reach even 100,000 residents. The urban culture and the centralist state, which had the ability to impose their sovereignty on the entire area, enabling the development of economic and cultural activity and the development and maintenance of a network of irrigation systems, were utterly destroyed. Following the decline of the ‘Abbasid Empire and the destructive Mongol Conquest, the various types of tribal social organization and the tribal production system became dominant. Under those conditions, it was no longer possible to establish a strong central administration that would be capable of ruling the entire area. The tribal forces that were dominant in the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris had neither the capacity nor the motive for maintaining and rehabilitating the complex irrigation systems or even preventing their decay. At the same time, following the lack of a central strong rule and the consequent decline of the security situation in the area, and as a result of political and economic developments in Europe and the Mediterranean basin, the importance of the trade routes from the Far East, India, and Persia through Mesopotamia to Europe declined. From the standpoint of the various states and empires that conquered the area by turns, starting in the thirteenth century—the short-lived Mongolian Empire, the Shi‘ite Persian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire—the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris was a miserable, impoverished outland, far from the political and cultural centers of the respective empires and with only marginal economic importance. Thus, for hundreds of

years, the powers that nominally ruled the area had no interest in its rehabilitation.

Starting in the early sixteenth century, when the area was conquered by the Ottomans and the Shi'ite Safavite Empire flourished in Persia, Iraq became the front line of a series of wars which ranged at intervals between the two empires for 250 years. The territories of Iraq were conquered gradually by the Ottoman Empire between 1514 and 1534, under the rule of sultans Salim I and Sulayman the Great. The Safavite Persians reconquered Baghdad in 1623; only eleven years later, in 1634, it was reconquered by Sultan Murad IV and again became part of the Ottoman Empire. These wars wrought havoc and destruction in Baghdad and throughout the area. The wars between the Ottomans and the Persians ended only in 1823, and the relative stability of this border was achieved following the Erezrum Treaty of 1847 between the Ottomans and the Persian Qajar Dynasty.

The decentralist trends apparent at intervals in the Ottoman Empire, along with the inability of the Ottoman administration, which had become entangled in wars in Europe, to allocate sufficient forces to defend the territories of Iraq, created conditions for the growth of local forces—tribal federations and urban local-Ottoman elites dominated by the Mamluks (military elites of slaves who recruited their manpower from the Caucasus Mountains). The Mamluks mingled with urban notable families and became dominant local forces centered in Baghdad and Mosul; in practice, these forces established autonomous rule in Baghdad (at first intermittent and later continuous) in 1702. Among scholars, a difference of opinion exists between the widespread approach which emphasizes the “Mamluk” military nature of the ruling elites in Egypt and Baghdad, who drew their manpower from the Caucasus Mountains, and the approach which emphasizes the local-Ottoman nature of the ruling households.¹ Starting in 1749, the power of the local-Ottoman-Mamluk households who ruled autonomously in Baghdad increased and continued to do so until 1831. The strong local rulers of Baghdad—the Mamluks, Sulayman the Great (1780–1802), and Dawud Pasha (1816–31)—established connections with agents of the British East India Company, which expanded its activity in the Gulf, Basra, and Baghdad during the eighteenth century. The local-Ottoman-Mamluk forces of Baghdad were forced to compete against many powerful rivals: Shi'ite Safavite Persia (and the Qajar dynasties of Persia, starting at the end of the eighteenth century), the strong tribal federations, the Kurdish Baban dynasty, which also maintained autonomous rule in the mountains of Kurdistan to the north, and the threat of Wahhabite invasion from the south (Bedouin raids under the banner of the Wahhabite doctrine—purist-extremist Sunnite Islam—against

the Shi'ite areas of the south). The Wahabite raids from the Arabian Peninsula inflicted grievous damage on the Shi'ite holy cities. Karbala was conquered for a brief period of time and looted in 1801; Najaf was under siege twice.

The autonomy of the local-Mamluk forces in Baghdad and Mosul came to an end when the Ottoman Empire entered a phase of centralization in the nineteenth century. The autonomy and power of the local forces ran counter to the centralist effort which was immanent to the attempt to bring about reforms in the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839). The moves made by Sultan Mahmud II toward reform and toward increasing the effectiveness of centralized government in the Ottoman Empire led him into conflict with local autonomous forces in Baghdad and Mosul and to clashes with the governor of Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali.

In 1831, following a siege imposed by the Ottoman Army on Baghdad, the local-Mamluk rule of the city was wiped out. The city itself was severely damaged, and great numbers of its population perished due to the siege, the plague, and the flood which swept through the city. In 1834, the autonomous local-Mamluk rule of Mosul was eliminated. The area between and surrounding the Euphrates and the Tigris was subordinated to the centralized but lax and inefficient Ottoman rule. Quite possibly, the elimination of autonomous rule by local-Ottoman-Mamluk forces put an end to the abortive beginnings of nineteenth-century Iraqi statehood. Following the conquest of Baghdad and Mosul, the local-Ottoman elites who were to develop in those cities were closely related to the Ottoman administration. The modernization of the territories of Iraq, like that of Syria, now continued within the framework of the centralist Ottoman state.

Notwithstanding the establishment of direct Ottoman rule, the *vilayets* of Iraq remained marginal, impoverished, and neglected, and the implementation of reform was slow, partial, and intermittent. Only after the appointment of Midhat Pasha, the most effective and determined of the Ottoman reformers, as *wali* of Baghdad and Basra, which were unified into a single vilayet, did the reforms accelerate. During his brief administration (1869–1872), Midhat Pasha succeeded in establishing centralized, effective Ottoman control of the entire area and in promoting reforms in administration, economics, transportation, and education. Admittedly, the brevity of his term in office prevented him from achieving in-depth reforms; still, the measures adopted by Midhat Pasha accelerated the processes of change which retained social, economic, and political significance over the long term.²

Midhat Pasha took measures to implement the Ottoman Land Law, enacted in 1858. By implementing the law, Midhat Pasha sought to break the strength of the tribal federations, to weaken the tribal leaders, and thereby to

reinforce the sovereignty of Ottoman rule. Implementation of the law, together with the changes in economic conditions which resulted from the expansion of trade and the growth of the market economy, contributed to the weakening and eventual crumbling of the tribal federations and gave the Ottoman rule and the city a position of supremacy over the tribes. However, notwithstanding the expectations of the Ottoman rulers, they did not succeed in establishing a strong, independent peasantry. The implementation of the law and the changeover to a market economy were exploited by traditional urban notables, who had found their place in the new Ottoman bureaucracy and had developed trade relations with the West, as well as by tribal notables, who sought to take over the lands of their tribes. This process, which continued into the first half of the twentieth century, gradually transformed the tribesmen into *fellahin*—landless or nearly landless serfs, while the tribal notables became major landowners with a guaranteed source of income: production for markets.³

During the centuries of Ottoman rule, the relations between the tribes and the urban local-Ottoman-Mamluk administration were complex. They embodied a system of rivalries and struggles for dominance, on one hand, and interactions involving economic connections and mutual influence, on the other. Among the tribal population, differences and rivalries prevailed among the tribes, at times reflecting the conflicts and struggles for control of the most basic resources between the nomadic shepherds and the *fellahin*, and between the tribes which controlled the water sources and irrigation systems and the tribal groups which yearned to control them.

The unstable relationship between the local-Ottoman-Mamluk administration, centered in the cities, and the tribes and tribal federations persisted until the late nineteenth century. The tribal federations and the tribal social frameworks began to disintegrate, due to the centralizing elements of the Ottoman reforms, the strengthening of the state and its organizational and military capacity, and initial changes in the economic, production, and transportation conditions. In a complicated process, which developed at different rates in different sections of the vilayets of Iraq during the second half of the nineteenth century, the tribes gradually became weaker and the central administration and the cities became stronger. The tribal frameworks and loyalties continued to constitute a factor in the social relations and political arena of Iraq in the twentieth century, following the contribution made by the British occupation in World War I and the policy of the Iraqi state to strengthen the tribal notables. (The conservation, albeit with changes, of tribalism in the Iraqi state was a direct consequence of the new kinds of interaction which had arisen between the tribal notables, now major landowners, and the central administration and political system.)