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SHOCK AND AWE, SECTARIANISM, AND VIOLENCE IN IRAQ POST-2003

by

SARIM AL-RAWI

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Shock and Awe, Sectarianism, and Violence in Iraq Post-2003: A Case Study

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Sarim Al-Rawi

This manuscript has been read and approved for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Arts/International Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Samira Haj  
Thesis Advisor

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Date

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Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis  
Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Shock and Awe, Sectarianism, and Violence in Iraq Post-2003: A Case Study

by

Sarim Al-Rawi

Advisor: Dr. Samira Haj

The violence systematically deployed upon the prosperous nation of Iraq in 2003 was directly influenced by the Shock and Awe doctrine set forth by Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade in their 1996 book *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. The experimental methods of warfare and violence outlined in the text describe methods for the systematic destruction of every major aspect of a nation and society, militarily, economically, and socially. In the wake of the US Invasion of Iraq, we saw the direct implementation of these methods by the occupation forces, setting off a brutal cycle of violence that is still raging today. This paper will attempt to understand the lineage of this violence, and how it manifested itself in sectarian civil war and eventually the brutality of the Islamic State. In addition, it will seek to understand this violence through the lens of nationalism, and the inherent violence in the concept of the nation-state, along with the concept of violence not as a state of exception but as a constant in modern society.

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## Introduction

The 2003 US Invasion of Iraq, through Operation Shock and Awe, brought about the implementation of an experimental form of total warfare that would go on to become status quo in the region, as nearly 20 years later this method of total violence has ingrained itself into the society it successfully sought to destroy and recreate in its own image. Shock and Awe brought about the total destruction of a prosperous nation, massive bloodshed, the destruction of countless artifacts of human history, and most importantly the transformation of a thriving society into an ongoing sectarian nightmare. While now recognized as a major tragedy in human history, no charges have yet to be brought against any of the architects of this invasion, despite clear evidence they knew exactly what they were doing. As Frantz Fanon writes, this massive cycle of violence is only a reaction to the violence that was initially imposed upon the Iraqi people by the invasion. While the state as it had existed was destroyed, many still held on to various beliefs in the idea of a nation, and took up arms in defense of their idea of what the nation was and should be.

Iraqi populations over much of the 20th century were subjected en masse to forms of social violence in the name of nationalism through mandatory participation in several wars, the Iraqi police state, and the manipulation of the national narrative, all of which erupted into physical violence when the state was brutally destroyed and dismantled and the army was disbanded. The dismissal of the armed forces left millions unemployed, angry, armed, and still holding affiliations to a national concept that in many ways no longer existed. Combined with

the imposition of sectarian identities by the occupation, sectarian factions all quickly developed their own ideas of how the now nonexistent state should be reimagined. De-Baathification and

<sup>1</sup> the dismissal of suspected Baathists from military, government, and other professional positions

weighed heavily on Western populations, who had previously been highly involved in the military and security forces. Resentment at this marginalization, coupled with a continued belief in various ideas of the Iraqi nation, fed the flames of resistance movements in the Western regions. The military expertise and participation of many in security and intelligence meant that many were already highly trained and experienced in advanced forms of violence. The general population itself was already highly desensitized to violence after mandatory participation in the brutal war with Iran and the invasion of Kuwait. While many initially thought they were fighting on the side of righteousness, increased levels of extremism on all sides led to an unstoppable cycle of violence that is still playing out today. The harbinger of such violence has lost much of its importance, as the brutality of the ISIS occupation was in many ways no different from the initial US invasion.

### Shock

The “Shock and Awe” doctrine, articulated in 1996 by Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade as a means of “rapid dominance” for the US military, espouses a strategy of overwhelming power and spectacular display of forces in order to paralyze the enemy and destroy his will to fight. Not only a military strategy, the concept includes elements of cyber warfare and the exploitation of new technologies, such as the use of disinformation. The doctrine makes no

attempts to hide its true military industrial origins and motivations, explicitly stating “it is clear that without a major threat to generate consensus and to rally the country around defense and defense spending, the military posture of the United States will erode as the defense budget is cut.”<sup>1</sup> The doctrine specifically outlines a plan for the total destruction of Iraq, its military, its infrastructure, its economy, and even the flow of vital information, in a show of force designed “to achieve a level of national shock akin to the effect that dropping nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on the Japanese.”<sup>2</sup>

As Naomi Klein describes it, “In open defiance of the laws of war barring collective punishment, Shock and Awe is a military doctrine that prides itself on not merely targeting the enemy’s military forces but, as its authors stress, the ‘society writ large’ - mass fear is a key part of the strategy.”<sup>3</sup> The doctrine advocates for numerous techniques that constitute forms of collective punishment, which is illegal under the Geneva Convention.

The Shock and Awe Doctrine provides the recipe not just for a military strike against a sovereign nation, but the total destruction of the state and all its apparatuses. This campaign of “massive bombardment” is to be prefaced by a slow campaign of “decay and default,” wherein the systematic destruction of society is slowly orchestrated through economic embargoes designed to starve the population into submission. Brief mentions of humanitarian concerns and collateral damage are brushed off as “war is a nasty business.”<sup>4</sup> The recipe outlined for the 2003

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<sup>1</sup> Ullman, Harlan, and James P. Wade. *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. (Philadelphia: Pavilion Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine*. (New York: Picador, 2007), 420.

<sup>4</sup> Ullman, *Shock and Awe*, 32-34.

invasion of Iraq is presented herein as an operation that would achieve victory “in a matter of days (or perhaps hours).” No mention is made of nearly two decades of warfare and bloodshed to follow, however this may be an unspoken part of the plan. The “Shock and Awe” doctrine sets forth an agenda of violence where the means seems to become the ends, in its goal of fomenting massive violence in service to Western defense interests. As military industrial interests continue to influence policy, warfare and violence itself become the ends, no longer the means toward peace but the goal in an endless cycle of violence. The current global situation shows that in the years since 2003, the goal of an endless cycle of war is becoming more of a reality every day. As the level of violence increases, the ends no longer justify the means, as there no longer appear to be any ends. Cities are “liberated” yet completely destroyed in the process, as was seen in Rawa, Fallujah, Mosul, and many other Western Iraqi cities liberated from ISIS. No thought is given to dual concepts of “collateral damage” and “blowback,” both of which became major issues after the destruction of the Iraqi state by the US. Just as the dismantling of the Iraqi army contributed to the rise of armed opposition groups made up of former soldiers, the destruction of the Islamic State will surely be followed by an underground terrorist campaign by surviving members, the beginnings of which have already been seen, and continuation of massive violence and collective suffering.

In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein describes CIA “interrogators,” who were in reality simply torture technicians, whose sole purpose was to break spirits and destroy people from within. These programs implemented across South America for the destruction of successfully developing democracies used their various methods to destroy the undesired citizen, and most importantly to obliterate the victim’s sense of solidarity with their comrades, along

with their sense of membership or duty to a greater body of good. A greater consequence of this obliteration of sentiments of love, solidarity, and collectivity is the mass precipitation of rabid individualism, which unchecked free-market economics feeds upon. In this system, nothing is of any real importance except the individual self and the ability of said self to become as rich as humanly possible with little regard for the well-being of others. A major goal of these shock methods of torture was to destroy what the prisoner loved, in order to replace it with something new. This is clearly the removal of that which does not fit into the greater economic plan, by the state in service to the corporation.<sup>5</sup> The destruction of the centuries-old Iraqi society and the emergence of a new society devoid of collectivism and solidarity, instead rooted in individualism, has been a common tool of Western domination through shock-based intervention in a number of nations, but nowhere has it been more violent and destructive than in Iraq.

In Iraq, similar sentiments are now taking root, where identification with the good of the various collective bodies and the greater Iraqi nation has largely been destroyed, replaced by a dog eat dog environment, where individuals are increasingly only concerned with bettering themselves. In a society smashed by sectarianism, internal othering is still a major societal problem, and even the tribal collectivity of previous generations has given way to inter-tribal conflicts over business and leadership. The good of the whole is now continuously sacrificed for the good of the individual, be it at the level of government, where politicians embezzle millions while the poor starve without even the most basic of services, or at the individual level, where crooked business deals akin to theft now even occur on a regular basis between members of the same family. The sense of community and social belonging that was once the backbone of Iraqi

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<sup>5</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 140-143.

society is rapidly disappearing with the collapse of the state. Since the nation and the state are so intertwined, the state becomes central to the formation of the nation. The weakness of the post-invasion government has made it essentially a client state for a myriad of outside influences.

Highly revered honorific titles such as tribal sheikhs have lost much of the levity they once carried, as individuals now actively work to assume these positions in order to exploit them for personal gain. Much of the credibility of these formerly near-sacred offices has now been destroyed. In many instances, armed militias for hire and outside pacts with competing tribes and groups have been utilized to enhance an individual's tribal position as a means of self-advancement. Tribal sheikhs, like politicians, have in recent years been known to sell off tribal assets for their own personal gain, and to violently claim positions of power with the aid of outside forces seeking to gain from certain arrangements.

The tribes and the tribal order in the region had traditionally been the source of familial collective protection and pride based on lineage and shared histories of bravery. In the Ottoman era, sheikhs and tribal leaders used connections in the government to obtain privileges, such as land and tax exemptions, in exchange for their abilities to exert social control over their clansmen, effectively turning many of them into feudal lords ruling over an indebted workforce of their fellow tribesmen. After the establishment of the Iraqi Republic, redistribution of lands upset this order, breaking the power base of many tribal elites. Saddam-era attempts to promote tribal culture and utilize tribes as part of the security apparatus brought a false sense of return to power for many. Through the Ba'athist client-patron state they were able to regain some privileges, most notably a blind eye for their smuggling activities. However, prosperous tribes were now defined by their loyalty to the regime, and not their lineages or histories of gallantry.

Through all of this, many began to betray their fellow tribesmen and lose much of their legitimacy. <sup>6</sup> Again we see individualist culture and a desire for personal wealth and advancement as rapidly chipping away at the traditional social and moral order of society that had defined life in this region for so long.

Describing a financial crisis in Argentina brought on by Western economic policies, Klein writes that “in moments of crisis, people are willing to hand over a great deal of power to anyone who claims to have a magic cure” While this is merely an economic invasion, the concept of the “shock” to society and its intended consequences remains the same. So-called “disaster capitalism” does not discriminate between the nature of crises, it only seeks to exploit the chaos they create in order to reshape societies into ideal environments for exploitation. While this is already devastating enough under the economic invasion model utilized by US corporations to devastate and rebuild South American economies in their favor, this tactic becomes far more destructive when it is coupled with the overlapping presence of various multinational war machines and their exploitation of similar concepts. <sup>7</sup>

Klein describes a Polish worker’s revolution against the Soviet Communist party that used Catholicism and democracy as oppositional ideologies to the totalitarian and anti-religious Soviet state. Earlier in the century Communist revolutionaries worldwide denounced religion as a tool of popular oppression. In the example of ISIS, we see the vague ideology of transmogrified concepts of jihad as a religious revival against illegitimate secular Western democracy, and a reversion to the authoritarian emirate. Through all of this, the nature of certain

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<sup>6</sup> Tejel, Jordi et. al. *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*. (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2012), 66-71.

<sup>7</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 210.

ideologies becomes unimportant, as the resistance simply adopts ideologies viewed as antithetical to those of the oppressor. Klein describes the Polish workers as “Tired of living in a country that worshipped an idealized working class but abused actual workers,” an example that can easily be applied to IS or any other authoritarian regime with an artificial or synthetic concept of its ideal subject.<sup>8</sup>

Klein cites the human rights activist Halina Bortnowska’s description of human reactions to these periods of crisis, “You can no longer expect people to act in their own best interests when they’re so disoriented they don’t know - or no longer care - what those interests are.” Writing from Baghdad in 2004, Klein quotes an Irish peace activist, “No one here cares about privatization ... What they care about is surviving.” Much of the same sentiment can be seen nearly 15 years later. The conditions of daily survival, of finding water and avoiding bombings, at times have become too pressing for many average Iraqis to take the time to consider the rapid and ongoing privatization and theft of national resources. These are exactly the conditions that the Shock and Awe doctrine thrives on. Similarly, crippled populations of the Anbar and Western Iraq, while somewhat aware of the greater events occurring around them during the IS occupation, were too powerless in their daily struggle for survival to do anything but take note of it. As Klein observes, “the parties with the most to gain never show up on the battlefield” and “extreme violence has a way of preventing us from seeing the interest it serves.” Criticizing the one word explanations for the 2003 invasion, “oil, Israel, Halliburton,” Klein posits that: “There was little interest in the idea that war was a rational policy choice, that the architects of the invasion had unleashed ferocious violence because they could not crack open the closed

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 217, 228.

economies of the Middle East by peaceful means, that the level of terror was proportional to what was at stake.”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps there is no more apt description of the goal of the invasion than that of Michael Ledeen, advisor to the Bush administration, who described it as “a war to remake the world.” However, while the local world that had existed previously was most certainly destroyed, the system it was replaced it with was stillborn, only partially remade, yet curiously ripe for further disaster exploitation, expanding Klein’s concept of the initial shock into a perpetual disaster that can be exploited and manipulated to no end for an unforeseen period of time. Thus the idea of the “shock,” normally synonymous with a quick and swift action, expands into a state of constant shock, wherein populations may be made to live for years under constant starvation, violence, bombardment, and economic hardship. What we see throughout the years of IS occupation in the region are populations living under a combination of many of the tenets of the “Shock and Awe” doctrine, a terrifying mix of numerous aspects of its policies of military and economic torture all being experienced simultaneously, rather than in the stages the doctrine initially lays them out in. Furthermore, any alleged notions of the “precision” of advanced technological weapons is completely disproven when we see the results of their deployment against random targets moving through civilian populations on a daily basis over the course of many years.

“Iraq was not an empty space on a map; it was and remains a culture as old as civilization, with fierce anti-imperialist pride, strong Arab nationalism, deeply held faiths and a majority of the adult male population with military training. If ‘nation creating’ was going to happen in Iraq, what exactly was supposed to become of the nation that was already there? The unspoken assumption from the beginning was that much of it would

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<sup>9</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 412-414.

have to disappear, to clear the ground for the grand experiment - an idea that contained, at its core, the certainty of extraordinary colonialist violence.”<sup>10</sup>

While those speaking in 2003 about the erasure of nations and the creation of new ones still imagined those new nations to exist within preexisting borders, it is now glaringly obvious, and perhaps a massive oversight, to have ever assumed that the Western restructuring of the region ever intended to honor previous borders. Transnational war machines know no borders, nor do they have any concern for them. While some, such as ISIS, disregard them entirely, others, such as Halliburton and other war corporations and machines, exploit them as a method of advancing their projects. Klein recognizes that worldwide, for idealized new nations to be created by Western interventions “whole categories of people would need to be pulled up ‘from the root.’” While the US invasion of Iraq represented “the use of ultimate shock to forcibly wipe out and erase all obstacles to the construction of model corporatist states free from all interference,” the exclusion, abandonment, and continued isolation of certain Iraqi populations seems to constitute an attempt by the majority to expel an unwanted minority that now has come to represent an oppositional threat to the newly desired nation, culturally and ideologically. While tribes of opposite sects often share common ancestry, innocent locals in Western Iraq are now treated as a potential threat merely because of their names or geographical origins.<sup>11</sup>

The ongoing battle between ISIS, the Iraqi state, and foreign actors comes to represent an extension of the original Shock and Awe doctrine, while at the same time pointing out the greatest flaw of said doctrine. While the doctrine was designed to be implemented in a swift “hit

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<sup>10</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 412-418.

<sup>11</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 418-419.

and run” style of war, it actually embedded itself into the victims of its initial bombardment, and into the society it initially sought to destroy and recreate. What its authors did not mention or perhaps even consider was that it would live on perpetually, in a way becoming a part of the society it was meant to replace. All the tactics described in what was to be the blueprint for the 2003 invasion are now still being used en masse by nearly all sides in the conflict with ISIS. Collective punishment, economic starvation, massive bombardment, and major media spectacles have all become essentially standard practices in the ongoing conflicts on both sides of the tenuous Iraqi-Syrian border. Just as the US used “shock therapy” interrogation tactics throughout the war, ISIS used similar tactics on their own detainees, torturing them until they would admit to nearly anything. For many in Iraq, Shock and Awe has become the standard, the reality.

The difference between the US in 2003 and IS during their period of occupation is the need to erase society in order to create the desired new reality that has been handed down by the invaders to the locals themselves. While still heavily manipulating the situation from the outside, the erasure of unwanted elements is now seen as largely conducted by the natives, seemingly eliminating much of the Western culpability while retaining their desired outcomes. One lesson of the 2003 invasion was that while the nation state could be demolished, the will and conviction of the natives was much more difficult to destroy. This can be seen in the harsh resistance US forces were met with nearly everywhere they went. It thus becomes much easier to facilitate internal Iraqi society to destroy itself, in the process destroying many of the elements that presented the fiercest opposition to external domination, such as religion, tradition,

collectivity, and solidarity. Even the presence of a single, clear enemy is eliminated, as the neighbor and countryman becomes the new enemy.

The religious facade of the IS death cult moves toward destroying many previous notions of Islam as an oppositional ideology to Western invasion, as Islam is now the mask worn by the invader, and thus the face of the source of suffering, while also attempting to destroy local indigenous forms of religious and cultural embodied practices. By subsuming previously existing resistance groups centered more on local and regional liberation, and with less extremist religious ideologies, IS effectively destroyed their momentum and potential, tarnishing their reputations and credibility in the process. Unlike in 2003, it now becomes much harder to point a finger at a clear enemy, evidenced by the various but uniform theories of a shadowy combination of alliances between the US, Israel, and Iran. Throughout this process, the sectarian Sunni versus Shia narrative is strengthened. While the perception and opinion of the conflict by locals who lived through it is much more nuanced and complex than this, their narrative and perspective becomes lost in the greater ongoing narrative outside of but surrounding the region, similar to the various state and military blockades surrounding the area, both physical and political. Despite the chaos of the conflict, the application of shock tactics is still somewhat surgical, however this operation is a massive amputation of limbs perceived as cancerous.

### War Machines

Through Achille Mbembe's theories on necropolitics, we see that in the modern era, bodies are now no longer subjected to violence as disciplinary punishment but often simply because they have been designated as "living dead" existing in "death worlds," or states of siege

and exception. This is an extension of Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, but Mbembe makes an attempt to move these discussions beyond the scope of Nazism and World War II and into the modern era. The modern "state of siege ... allows a modality of killing that does not distinguish between the external and the internal enemy. Entire populations are the target of the sovereign." Biopolitical subdivisions between the living and those marked for death take on a racial nature, by "imagining the inhumanity" of others in order to cultivate further one's own life.<sup>12</sup>

Individuals living under bare life, lacking a home, personal rights, or political status, signify states of "social death," "death-in-life," or a perpetual "state of injury."<sup>13</sup> All of these concepts, biopower and the various states of non-being, were subsequently imported to the periphery by Western colonial projects, in what can now be seen as a synthesis of "massacre and bureaucracy, that incarnation of Western rationality." Mbembe describes the colony as a place where peace is represented through "war without end." Mbembe's views on necropower are deterritorialized, in contrast to previously more spatial views on states of exception, as seen in the work of Carl Schmitt. We can see that in the present, despite what many would describe as the presence of legitimate states, regions representing populations marked for death by the bearers of necropower are simply delegitimized and subsequently subjected to the various instruments of necropolitical violence. Furthermore, the collapse of the discourse between war and peace in these spaces, along with the imbalance of power and lack of reciprocity, raises the

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<sup>12</sup> Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40. 30, 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

question of whether this is even war or simply pure violence and annihilation, “pure slaughter.”

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Modern wars of globalization are now seen as nomadic “hit-and-run affairs” where the doctrine of overwhelming force is implemented. Mbembe describes how forms of economic violence precipitate the collapse of many postcolonial states, unable to exercise sovereignty over their populations through economic instruments, such as debt. This leads to deterritorialization and the rise of many non state actors, often developing into “war machines” and militia economies. Private military corporations like Blackwater, militia groups like Hezbollah, the failed Islamic State project, and the Iranian-Iraqi Badr Organization all constitute examples of the different forms of war machines. These militia economies often support themselves through the extraction of resources and “complex links with state forms.” It is important to stress these links with more “legitimate” states, as these war machines rely on and are often cultivated by foreign actors as tools for influencing regional politics, outside of and often in opposition to previously established nation states. It is through these war machines that converging economic and political actors often carry out a twofold domination of states and/or regions marked for intervention and exploitation. These war machines can cause immobilization and displacement of peoples, often “confined in camps and zones of exception.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 22-25.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

## Death Machines

ISIS represented a new form of so-called Islamic jihad. The Taliban, for instance, are a nationalist jihadist group, who despite their struggle with the Afghan government, still accept the framework of the Afghan nation state. The Islamic State, however, subsumed various groups and co-opted their various local liberation struggles into a transnational project. In taking up arms, many of these groups are rejecting the classical view of jihad, which was intended to prevent the use of violence by non-state actors. As Kamran Bokhari explains, “the post–Ottoman Empire geo-political vacuum allowed non-state actors to justify that in the absence of a religiously legitimate state authority jihad had become an individual and/or group effort.” Bokhari argues that during instances of internal struggle, such as the civil war in Syria, regimes can begin to sink to the level of non-state actors, as a civil war evolves into a more transnational crisis. When the regime sinks to this level, it is much easier for other actors, such as transnational war machines, to step in and fill the void created by the collapse. Non-state actors such as ISIS and al-Qaeda thus fall under the category of “rejector Islamists” who reject the state and democracy in favor of a transnational language of jihad. Where the two groups differ, however, is on the need for an actual territorial and spatial state and caliphate, as opposed to the globalized and decentralized jihad of al-Qaeda.<sup>16</sup>

While IS diverged from al-Qaeda when they insisted on the creation of an actual state, leading to the relatively rapid demise of the IS group. The loose collection of individuals identifying as al-Qaeda has thrived for years on globalization and decentralization. Both,

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<sup>16</sup> Bokhari, Kamran, and Farid Senzai. “Rejector Islamists: Al-Qaeda and Transnational Jihadism.” In: *Political Islam in the Age of Democratization*. Middle East Today (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 101–18.

however, lack any true concrete ideologies except in their seemingly endless battle against the presence of the Western crusader state. This lack of any real ideology outside of their avowed violent crusades against the West lead both to fall to the level of little more than violent death cults. Any real attempts at positioning these revivalist jihadist groups within the tradition have failed, as they appear to have no real ideology. The elimination of the Crusader state presence through acts of violence has become their religion, and violent and suicidal acts the public performance of their faith. <sup>17</sup> Taken to its furthest extremes, this type of individuation of the religion and religious thinking can create individuals like Osama Bin Laden and his ilk. The West is now fighting an enemy it not only does not understand but cannot even define.

Through all of this, these multinational war machines descend further into the realm of death machines, serving uncertain and shadowy interests but really only propagating death and destruction through a vague ideology of sacrifice and slaughter. Removing the rhetoric used to justify any of their activities, we can see that the US military, Blackwater, and other private security companies are essentially no different from transnational armed groups like ISIS. Embracing Westernization and the colonial modernity project leaves nations and populations vulnerable to the invariable loss of dignity that comes along with the colonized native in the colonial system. Accepting the modern status quo of violence is a means to attempt to reclaim or preserve this dignity. Violence, domination, and militias are a symptom of modernity. If armed violence is the standard for domination then it is also the method of resistance. As Fanon famously describes, violence is necessary if it is the only language the colonizer speaks:

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<sup>17</sup> Devji, Faisal. *Landscapes of the Jihad*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). 119-124.

“The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force. In fact if the colonist’s argument leaves the settler unmoved it is because the latter poses the issue of his liberation in virtually identical terms: ‘Let us form groups of two or five hundred and let each group deal with a colonist.’ It is in this mutual frame of mind that both protagonists begin the struggle.”<sup>18</sup>

As a result of these ongoing campaigns by and struggles between various war machines, the looting and destruction of cultural artifacts and important pieces of national and world heritage creates a dangerous situation, destroying people’s connection to the land, to sacred places, and to their own history, and thus destroying whatever national conception and identity they previously held. This destruction of the historical concept of the nation leaves nothing in its place, creating a vacuum, a void, where danger lurks, when established culture and the very fabric of society is destroyed. The destruction and looting of cultural sites, whether it be in Baghdad under the US coalition, or in Western Iraq under ISIS, has the same effect on society. While the US invasion destroyed the previous Iraqi state, leaving in its place a chaotic kleptocracy ripe for capitalist and colonialist exploitation, the ISIS invasion and subsequent reign of terror dealt a major blow to the Iraqi soul and psyche, cutting even deeper into the flesh of society than the sectarian strife that erupted after 2003. The destruction of artifacts and holy sites, the desecration of religion, and most importantly the gross violations of human rights and utter annihilation of civil society are all the more devastating when they are carried out from within, and not by a wholly foreign group who had long been considered an enemy and a threat.

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<sup>18</sup> Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 43.

## The Gutting of the West

Mahmoud al-Rawi, a lifelong resident of the Western village of Rawa, on the Syrian border, survived four long years of life under the Islamic State regime. In interviews, he describes in great detail how the economic decimation of the region continued after the fall of the Western regions to ISIS:

“When ISIS entered, they had their eye on the big installations, and one of them is the phosphate plant in al-Qaim. They dismantled everything, and they took it to Syria. But where did it end up? Probably in Israel. Every day, there were about fifty tractor trailers leaving the facility, taking the fertilizer from the phosphate plant, until they emptied everything. After they stole all the fertilizer, they moved onto the machine shops, and all the machine shops were dismantled and taken away. We had state of the art machine shops, they took everything. Where? They said to Raqqa. We asked people in Raqqa, they said they’d never seen such things. Even cables and other basic things, anything, doors, windows, they took everything. The American surveillance drones and planes are always on top of the phosphate plant watching everything, they watched them carry everything away, why didn’t they hit them then? The Americans are behind it. In Husaybah they took away all the high tension power towers and the cables, and the Americans were watching them the whole time, and did nothing. The Americans would wait until they finished their jobs, when everything was removed, and then they would strike, but they wouldn’t hit anything. Sometimes ISIS would be stationed somewhere, for instance in a house, and would get a signal that a strike was coming, sometimes a laser would shine on their location, so they would leave, and after an hour or an hour and a half, it would be hit. How did they know their positions were going to be hit?”<sup>19</sup>

The Akashat fertilizer and phosphate facility in the border town of al-Qaim, a vital and important regional resource, has been a recurring issue for programs of occupation, oppression, and economic starvation before. Alleged by Western authorities to be capable of producing small amounts of uranium, the facility was never able to produce anywhere near the quantity or quality of uranium needed for nuclear weapons. During the US Invasion beginning in January 1991, the

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<sup>19</sup> Mahmoud al-Rawi. (2018, 18-20 June). Personal interviews.

facility was bombed several times and heavily damaged. It was suspected by coalition forces that the mining facility was being used to hide munitions and other weapons caches, including for SCUD missiles launched at Israel.<sup>20</sup> UN IAEA reports from December 2002 allege that the site was used in a small capacity for mining uranium, a key ingredient in the production of nuclear “yellowcake,” a substance that can only be used in weapons production if it is enriched to a very high level.<sup>21</sup> An NBC News report from July of 2008 on the removal of the yellowcake produced in Iraq before 1991 reported that yellowcake alone is not nearly potent enough for a so-called “dirty bomb,” a concept Dick Cheney and others in the Bush regime used to instill fear and build support for their global “War on Terror.” The same report alleges that the yellowcake removed from Iraq could have been enriched for use in Iraq’s Tuwaitha nuclear energy facility outside of Baghdad (where it was found), but would have required sophisticated technology unavailable in Iraq at the time to enrich any further.<sup>22</sup> In the cruelest and darkest form of irony, many of the weapons of mass destruction the invasion was predicated upon were only found in Iraq after the US used them on the Iraqi population, causing cancer rates to skyrocket, along with birth defects and other illnesses associated with exposure to depleted uranium and other heavy

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<sup>20</sup> Rosenau, William. "COALITION SCUD-HUNTING IN IRAQ, 1991." In: *Special Operations Forces and Elusive Enemy Ground Targets: Lessons from Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War*, 29-44. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001), 35.

<sup>21</sup> "UNMOVIC/IAEA Press Statement on Inspection Activities in Iraq, 12 December 2002." IAEA. December 11, 2002. Accessed February 15, 2019. <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/mediaadvisories/unmovic/iaea-press-statement-inspection-activities-iraq-12-december-2002>.

<sup>22</sup> "Secret U.S. Mission Hauls Uranium from Iraq." NBCNews.com. July 05, 2008. Accessed February 23, 2019. [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/25546334/ns/world\\_news-mideast\\_n\\_africa/t/secret-us-mission-hauls-uranium-iraq/#.XUPlbtNKjBJ](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/25546334/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/secret-us-mission-hauls-uranium-iraq/#.XUPlbtNKjBJ).

metals. The fallout and toxic legacy of the use of these weapons on the Iraqi people has been described by experts as worse than Hiroshima.<sup>23</sup>

The main purpose of the Akashat plant in al-Qaim was to mine phosphates from the rich soil in the area, which provided not only employment for many residents of impoverished local towns, but also raw materials for farming and minerals for export. The repeated destruction of this facility by occupying forces represents the continued use of a strategy of attempting to remove and destroy local economies, food production resources, and sustainability. Just as Iraq's water has now been poisoned by heavy metals from years of airstrikes, and precious ancient seed banks destroyed and outlawed, militarized occupational forces continue to serve economic interests by destroying any capability of the native populations to sustain themselves. It is no wonder that locals are so quick to blame those they view as the enemies of Iraq for the destruction and removal of their most essential resources and infrastructure. To them the situation is clear as day, and for anyone living under the US or the IS occupation, it would seem that the program of economic ruination systematically inflicted upon the entire occupied region was engineered from the outside by certain forces seeking to benefit from turning the entire area into an inhospitable wasteland. If a nation's ability to produce their own food is eliminated, it is much easier to starve them, and thus cripple them. This too is a major tactic clearly laid out in the Shock and Awe doctrine:

“Rapid Dominance must be all-encompassing. It will require the means to anticipate and to counter all opposing moves. It will involve the capability to deny an opponent things of critical value, and to convey the unmistakable message that unconditional compliance is the only available recourse. It will imply more than the direct application of force. It

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<sup>23</sup> Cockburn, Patrick. "Toxic Legacy of US Assault on Fallujah 'worse than Hiroshima'." The Independent. October 22, 2011. Accessed February 04, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/toxic-legacy-of-us-assault-on-fallujah-worse-than-hiroshima-2034065.html>.

will mean the ability to control the environment and to master all levels of an opponent's activities to affect will, perception, and understanding. This could include means of communication, transportation, food production, water supply, and other aspects of infrastructure as well as the denial of military responses. Deception, misinformation, and disinformation are key components in this assault on the will and understanding of the opponent.”<sup>24</sup>

### The “Insurgency”

The first wave of insurgents to Iraq were not self-proclaimed jihadists but approximately four thousand foreign guerrillas, motivated largely by Arab nationalism, with a major religious undercurrent. These guerrillas from various neighboring Arab nations fought alongside the elite fighters of the Fedayeen Saddam, often with greater fervor than the regular Iraqi forces. The combination of these two groups gave some of the staunchest resistance to the initial invasion in March 2003. Many nationalist Iraqis also returned from abroad to defend the nation. Despite the tenacity of this small group of fighters, determined to defend the Iraqi nation and the greater Arab and Muslim worlds against the invading US, they were unorganized, poorly trained, and had very little effect against the massive US war machine.<sup>25</sup>

Sunni narratives of victimhood emerged post-2003 as the US blindly persecuted many former officials in the supposed campaign of de-Baathification, intended to establish justice during the transition. Exploited by newly powerful elites with relatively weak power bases, partisan and sectarian ambitions took hold of the project and redirected it for political goals. Sunni grievances and sectarian dividing lines were further amplified by the perception that US occupation forces were favoring Kurdish and Shia interests, while shutting out the Sunnis,

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<sup>24</sup> Ullman, *Shock and Awe*, XXVII.

<sup>25</sup> Hashim, Ahmed. *Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Iraq*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 12-14.

viewed collectively as former Saddam loyalists.<sup>26</sup> In the wake of the occupation, many Sunnis, some now stripped of their previous status and privileges, waited to see if they would be included in the new government. A demonstration was held in Baghdad in April 2003 in the largely Sunni neighborhood of Adhamiyya, calling for an Islamic state to unite all Muslims, Sunni and Shia. As many began to see the US presence as an occupation rather than a liberation, and suffering disrespect at the hands of US forces, opposition to the US presence quickly began to build. A narrative of the US versus the Islamic world began to take hold in the minds of many, growing into an existential crisis of identity.

As many from the Sunni community had been at the uppermost echelons of Saddam's regime, they came under much closer scrutiny than other groups during his reign, having been the source of numerous attempts to overthrow him. This affected their ability to effectively mobilize and organize after the invasion. While groups such as the formerly outlawed Iraqi Islamic Party and the Association of Muslim Scholars actively attempted to advocate for Sunni interests in the formation of a new government, the anti-occupation rhetoric of many religious clerics pushed disgruntled youth towards taking action against the occupation. After the dissolution of the military by the US in May of 2003, many newly unemployed men in Fallujah and other Western regions struggled to feed their families, as was the case all over Iraq. Many had served their entire lives in high ranking positions in the military. As the language of local religious clerics denouncing the occupation grew stronger, insurgent attacks on occupation forces grew more frequent. The subsequent response by the US forces, arresting and disrespecting

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<sup>26</sup> Tejel, *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*, 72.

many local tribal shaykhs and other men, caused further anger and unrest. As the anti-occupation language of religious leaders increased, so did insurgent attacks on US forces. <sup>27</sup>

### al-Anbar

al-Anbar and the surrounding regions are home to one of the major Sufi communities in Iraq, the followers of the religious Sheikh Ahmad al-Rifa'i, whose descendants and followers settled major parts of Western Iraq and Eastern Syria. As Sufis are often considered to be the greatest enemy of Salafist and Wahhabist beliefs, many of their shrines and meeting places came under attack and destruction after the IS occupation. Part of a theological rift going back to the 13th century theologian Ibn Taymiyyah and later utilized in the 18th century by Mohammed Ibn Abdel Wahab, these scholars disagreed with Sufis on the concept of *tawheed*, or the manifestation of the oneness of God. While Sufi belief, through the work of Ibn Arabi in the 12th century, views unity with God through the oneness of existence, Taymiyyah and later Abdel Wahab stressed a separation between God and man. These scholars, whose work was later appropriated as part of the loose theology of ISIS, viewed Sufi practices of transcendentalism and other rituals to be pantheistic and heretical, in a way placing Sufis as the original targets of their calls for religious reform. <sup>28 29</sup>

In the diaspora created by the ISIS occupation and their suppression and outright assault on these traditions, many of these displaced groups continued to practice in exile in areas of

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<sup>27</sup> Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Iraq*, 19-29.

<sup>28</sup> Haj, Samira. *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39.

<sup>29</sup> Dallal, Ahmad. *The Political Theology of ISIS*. (Washington: Tadween Publishing, 2017) 21.

Baghdad and elsewhere. This is in addition to the long-standing traditions in various Sufi shrines and meeting places in Baghdad, most notably at the important shrine of Abd-Al Qadir al-Jailani and the Sufi center at the mosque of Sultan Ali, the latter located between the banks of the Tigris and the historic Rashid Street. Followers of Sufi religious orders under the IS occupation were forced to hide in their homes and deny their faiths, and many of the saintly shrines and other holy sites for these orders were bombed and bulldozed into dust by the zealots of the Islamic State. Through this repression, a rich and highly sacred part of regional culture was destroyed, driven out, and suppressed.

The regional traditions of Sufism represent further evidence to the relatively minor status in the pre-invasion period of Salafist and other extremist movements. Salafist and Wahabist movements were not new to Iraq, having existed in small numbers during the 1990s, partially tolerated by Saddam. Beginning in the early 1990s but growing more rapidly in the late 90s, growing trends of Salafist and other extremist beliefs began to take hold in Fallujah and other traditionally conservative Sufi areas of Western Iraq. Attempts by the regime to eliminate this threat, such as expulsion of suspected salafists from the military, only served to fan the flames of extremism. Except for a few attacks on liquor stores in major cities, their followers did not begin conducting organized campaigns of violence until after the fall of the Baathist regime. Salafist currents during the period leading up to the fall of the regime seemed to infiltrate and find numerous ways to fill vacuums of power and ideology. There was already a small but growing presence of former mujahideen from Afghanistan in Iraq before the US invasion, and the regime made attempts at tracking down and suppressing Salafist and Jihadist leaders. In several instances, Sunni tribal factions ousted from the security forces for various offenses turned to

Salafism after being disenfranchised by the regime. During these paranoid processes of self-preservation, the regime's power and ideological base began to shrink, allowing Salafist ideologies to fill many of the vacuums this created.

Western Sufis became the unseen victims of this rise in newer ideologies of violence and so-called jihad. Perceived US favoritism of previous Kurdish and Shia victimhood, along with the more aggressive approach of the occupation forces in Sunni areas, led to further radicalization of the Sunni opposition, now driven underground in their attempts at organizing. However, just like the monolithic "Shia" population, what was to become the "Sunni" insurgency actually grew out of many various and disparate networks, tribal, social, professional, and religious.<sup>30</sup> Between the Gulf War and 2003, the massive UN program of economic sanctions on Iraq severely affected the flow and availability of goods and services, and a cross border smuggling network thrived between Iraq, Syria, and Jordan. This was facilitated by the connections between families and tribes on both sides of the border, and the many local connections to the government and security forces.<sup>31</sup> The porous nature of these borders and the close and active cross-border connections between residents would prove to be a major advantage to insurgent groups, culminating in the rapid IS invasion and occupation of Western Iraq in early June 2014.

Methods of terrorism and insurgency become an instrumental aspect of achieving a certain goal, mainly unraveling the legitimacy of the government and widening the gap between ethno-sectarian groups, the "us" and "them," the perceived other, often so far that a return to the

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<sup>30</sup> Tejel, *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*, 72-73.

<sup>31</sup> Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Iraq*, 25-26.

previous status quo may seem impossible. This was the tactic employed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian former criminal and drug addict who experienced a religious awakening and travelled to Afghanistan where he operated a *mujahideen* training camp. Fleeing to Iraq after the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, Zarqawi began organizing al-Qaeda affiliated cells under the name Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad and later al-Qaeda in Iraq. Despite the lack of many important details in his story, it has become widely accepted that Zarqawi was the father of numerous violent extremist movements in Iraq.<sup>32</sup>

These early groups are loosely referred to by locals in al-Anbar was the Tawheed Army. After the US invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi began using his cells to launch attacks on US and UN targets, in addition to focusing on Shia holy sites. That these attacks themselves were carried out by affiliates of what was at the time referred to as Al-Qaeda in Iraq points directly to the concerted effort by these extremist groups to fuel the flames of sectarianism in Iraq from the very beginning of the invasion. The deadly car bombing in Najaf in August 2003 and the March 2004 Ashura bombings were both widely believed to have been carried out by al-Qaeda affiliates, namely Zarqawi.<sup>33</sup> Western news articles published at the time of the bombings hold many clues as to the local public sentiment, where Iraqis interviewed blame foreigners trying to foment sectarian violence for the attacks.<sup>34</sup> As Naomi Klein describes:

“It’s worth remembering that in February 2004, eleven months after the invasion, an Oxford Research International poll found that a majority of Iraqis wanted a secular government: only 21 percent of respondents said their favored political system was ‘an

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<sup>32</sup> Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-insurgency in Iraq*, XX.

<sup>33</sup> Dallal, *The Political Theology of ISIS*, 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> "Middle East | Iraq Shias Massacred on Holy Day." BBC News. March 02, 2004. Accessed March 22, 2019. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3524589.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3524589.stm).

Islamic state,' and only 14 percent ranked 'religious politicians' as their preferred political actors. Six months later, with the occupation in a new and more violent phase, another poll found that 70 percent of Iraqis wanted Islamic law as the basis of the state. As for sectarian violence, it was virtually unknown for the first year of the occupation. The first major incident, the bombing of Shia mosques during the holiday of Ashura, was in March 2004, a full year after the invasion.”<sup>35</sup>

This was a concerted attempt to further instigate a growing sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shias. Disagreeing with Zarqawi's attacks on Shia civilians and mosques, in 2005 Ayman al-Zawahiri and others in the broader al-Qaeda leadership instructed Zarqawi to cease these activities, and to put any aspirations for the creation of an Islamic State in Iraq on hold. Zarqawi ignored these orders, and after he was killed in June 2006 the loose federation of mujahideen groups he had formed in Iraq (now in the midst of a brutal sectarian war he had helped start), declared the establishment of an Islamic State in Iraq, ignoring further requests from Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden to do otherwise.<sup>36</sup>

Many local militias, such as the Naqshbandi Army, disagreed with more extremist factions on their policy of *takfeer* and attacking other Muslims and civilians, viewing the American forces as the only legitimate target. In an attempt to fight the insurgency, groups of local fighters, many former insurgents, were recruited by the US forces to weed out extremist groups, in a campaign known as The Awakening. Beginning in late 2005, this program established and backed local tribal militias against al-Qaeda related factions, with the promise of payment for their service along with eventual incorporation into the Iraqi army. When the US “withdrew” and the Maliki government took over in 2008, none of these promises were met,

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<sup>35</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 443.

<sup>36</sup> Dallal, *The Political Theology of ISIS*, 13-14.

leaving local militias weary of any future collaborations with or promises from the new Iraqi government. <sup>37</sup> Ali Hatem Suleiman, a former Emir of the Dulaim, the largest tribe in al-Anbar, recounts the dilemma:

“It was the Awakening that crushed Al Qaeda in Al-Anbar, in Baghdad, in Diyala. We did it. After that the Iraqi government told me that my men would be able to join the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. Fine, I said, I want what is best for my country. But now it has become clear that the Iraqi government does not want to keep its word. The politicians just wanted to take credit for our military successes. Thousands of former Awakening fighters are still jobless. And many of those who did join the Iraqi security forces have been kicked out. They accused them of being Ba’athists and terrorists, but these are just lies. It is the people who run the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense who are using sectarianism to advance their interests. They are thinking that if they exclude the Sunnis from the police and the army they will be able to give more jobs to the constituencies of their parties. No, I have no respect for these politicians. They are scum. And we are paying for their mistakes in blood.” <sup>38</sup>

Without making any excuse for the actions and ideological platforms of the various Islamic resistance movements that sprung up in the wake of the US invasion, in order to further understand the situation it becomes necessary try to understand these groups and their membership. While the IS organization clearly differed from al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and represented a clear rejection of previous modes of resistance, a lineage must be traced to properly understand the greater history of these forms of resistance in the region. One of the groups who came to be associated with Sunni “jihadist” resistance movements was the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order, a militia allegedly centered around members of a local Sufi order in

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<sup>37</sup> Harvey, Derek, and Michael Pregent. “Opinion: Who's to Blame for Iraq Crisis.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 12 June 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/12/opinion/pregent-harvey-northern-iraq-collapse/>.

<sup>38</sup> Manfredi, Federico. "Iraq's Crooked Politicians: Talking With Sheik Ali Hatem, Leader of the Sunni Awakening Councils." *The Huffington Post*. May 25, 2011. Accessed August 02, 2019. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/federico-manfredi/iraqs-crooked-politicians\\_b\\_683537.html?ec\\_carp=6891144354529265779](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/federico-manfredi/iraqs-crooked-politicians_b_683537.html?ec_carp=6891144354529265779).

Western Iraq, who played a major role in the insurgency of local armed groups against the US occupation. The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi was allegedly led by the last member of the Ba'athist inner circle to remain at large, Izzat al-Douri, Saddam's Vice President, and was rumored to be composed of many former Ba'athist hardliners and members of the officers corps. The Western provinces, including Saddam's ancestral village of Tikrit, had been the source of some of the staunchest support for the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, with many locals at the highest levels of government. The alleged Sufi theology of the group's members has led to a checkered history of conflict and collaboration between them and other militias in the area, at times joining with "Islamic Resistance" groups loosely referred to as al-Qaeda against the US occupation, but also at times clashing with the very same groups.

During the years of the strongest sectarian strife, many young men throughout the region were affiliated or participated in some way with various incarnations of these groups. Serving as a precursor to IS, some of these groups even carried out certain judgments for perceived crimes of morality against Islamic ideals, such as the killing of a local man who opened a liquor store in Ana after 2003. To understand a young man's impetus for joining such groups, one should imagine the situation in Iraq through his eyes at the time. The government had been fully destroyed and what remained was in a state of total collapse. Virtually no state existed outside of the US occupation forces and the sham coalition government they had established. After the incitement of internal sectarian civil war, aided by foreign influences, Sunni and Shia militias were killing each other openly on the streets of Baghdad and elsewhere. Innocent civilians were often executed or attacked simply for having a name associated with a certain sect.

A young man at this time, surrounded by violence, unemployed, his country in shambles, the former state completely destroyed, with no foreseeable hope for the future, might be very likely to join a movement that promised him the goal of freeing his homeland from those who had destroyed it, especially if the message was that they wanted to destroy him and his way of life as well. The added sectarian aspect of defending his family, his tribe, and his own life against a newfound murderous other who also wanted to destroy him would surely convince many impressionable young men to take up arms in the name of sect and security. Before and after the US withdrawal, government corruption and lack of opportunities for education, employment, and marriage for many young men also led them to fall prey to the message of empowerment provided by extremist groups. Many of those disenfranchised from the security forces due to suspicion of subversive activities or religious extremism brought with them valuable military expertise, operational, geographical, and otherwise, which would later prove invaluable to the various militias and armed groups in the Western region.<sup>39</sup>

The clashes in April of 2013 are a reminder of a now overshadowed period of mainly peaceful popular protests in many areas of Western Iraq against the abuses of the Maliki government. In many different cities, but centered particularly on Rumadi, massive displays of solidarity against government corruption were made as thousands stood united weekly for Friday prayers, often blocking the highway between Baghdad and the West. After several standoffs between protesters and security forces turned violent, the nature of the movement itself took a violent turn. Saddoun al-Obaidi, a tribal leader of protests in Hawija, described the situation, “The peaceful demonstrations are over, due to what happened today. Now we are going to carry

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<sup>39</sup> Tejel, *Writing the Modern History of Iraq*, 74.

weapons. We have all the weapons we need, and we are getting support from other provinces.” After hearing of the clashes in Hawija, demonstrators in Mosul reportedly abandoned their peaceful sit ins to take up arms in revenge. <sup>40</sup> It is within this climate of resistance to government oppression that IS initially began making rapid inroads into Western Iraq, in early 2014. Many now point to the 2013 Hawija clashes as the turning point between peaceful protest against rampant government corruption and armed struggle against the sectarian Maliki regime. To make matters worse, in December of 2013, Maliki gave a speech where he described the struggle against the Islamic State as part of the ongoing struggle between “the followers of Yazeed and the followers of Husayn,” adding a sectarian angle to a national emergency and alienating many Sunnis in the process. <sup>41</sup>

Following the US withdrawal, the massive corruption and sectarian abuses of the Nouri al-Maliki government led many to see ISIS as a welcome solution. Adel Ali Ahmed, a former ISIS fighter now in captivity, describes the Iraqi army as treating those in his village like an occupying force. When ISIS arrived, “They came suddenly, it was like a miracle, they lifted all the checkpoints, There were no arrests, nobody would ask where you are going, this was how life had been. Because of this, I became convinced, and joined them.” A younger man, now imprisoned for his participation as an IS fighter, describes his motivations for joining. “We Sunnis had a lot of pressure on us. For example, if there was an explosion in our neighborhood, they would raid every (Sunni) neighborhood, they would arrest all the young men, and right

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<sup>40</sup> Arango, Tim. "Dozens Killed in Battles Across Iraq as Sunnis Escalate Protests Against Government." The New York Times. April 24, 2013. Accessed March 3, 2019. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/24/world/middleeast/clashes-at-sunni-protest-site-in-iraq.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Hassan, Hassan. "More Than ISIS, Iraq's Sunni Insurgency." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. June 17, 2014. Accessed August 02, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/55930>.

away they would begin torturing them. I was arrested four times. They tortured me a lot.” Even a Christian woman from Mosul, now displaced and living in Kurdistan, describes their frustration: “After the fall of Saddam and the arrival of the Maliki army, we lived a life of hell. Every day they raided the homes, every day inspections, every day they would take our sons away, In the beginning, we only saw good in ISIS. We saw them as regular people who wanted to get rid of the living hell, as we called it.”<sup>42</sup> As seen here, it must be emphasized how the IS regime initially occupied Western Iraq and achieved success through a program of the elimination of the massive corruption seen under the Maliki government and for the filling of a void of services not provided to the Western provinces by the sectarian Maliki regime. While coercion and submission later became the nature of the Islamic State, they were initially welcomed as liberators from the stifling corruption of the sectarian Maliki regime, removing checkpoints and providing basic services without demanding exorbitant bribery.

Saeed Tamer Ali, now a 15 year old captive who graduated from the 45 day ISIS program of education, describes to liberating Iraqi forces, “The training included physical fitness, ideology lessons, religious courses, PKC machine gun, Kalashnikov, M16 ... A lot of [my friends] joined them. A lot of young people like me joined them. Someone convinced me that I will meet the virgins and paradise.” Ali also describes promises from IS to send him to Baghdad to complete his education. This false promise of an education in Baghdad after an ISIS victory in taking the city is echoed by many captured fighters, some barely teenagers.<sup>43</sup> Many questioned

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<sup>42</sup> Anderson, Ben. VICE News. 15 August 2016. “Fighting ISIS”. Retrieved from:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EUachAFhEA>

<sup>43</sup> Walker, Seb. VICE News. 13 December 2016. “Captured ISIS Fighters On Drugs On The Battlefield”. Retrieved from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-z5\\_sspsdhk&bpctr=1566442562](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-z5_sspsdhk&bpctr=1566442562)

as to their participation in the violence give the same answer, that they had no choice, and were afraid for the safety of their families. Adel Ali Ahmed adds that at first he felt he was fighting in the name of Islam, but soon, “when I started seeing death and destruction, people dying and things like this, I regretted it, I regretted it very much. If I could, I would tell the people I have hurt to take their revenge on me, any person I have hurt, let them take their revenge on me.”<sup>44</sup>

After the fall of the Anbar to IS, former affiliations with these various and often overlapping resistance organizations created a difficult situation for many residents. Many men who had previously been members of resistance groups but had since abandoned the cause were called to rejoin under the flag of IS, and many who refused were then killed. Many disillusioned former Awakening fighters, abandoned by the US and the Iraqi government, unrewarded for their sacrifice, welcomed the arrival of what was initially seen as a liberatory group. An elder Sunni sheikh now leading a militia against ISIS describes the shifting of allegiances. “ISIS came and said they were against the US, and we stood with them. We left them some space, we were patient with them. Then, they turned against us, They slaughtered our children, and burned our men.”<sup>45</sup>

Upon entering the region en masse in early June 2014, IS forces initially formed an alliance with the formerly secular Pan-Arabist Ba’athists and Sufis of the Naqshbandi Army. While such an alliance seems tantamount to the IS ideologies, with secularists and Sufis two of their main avowed enemies (in addition to Shias), this was clearly a move at ingratiation with the locals followed by consolidation of power by neutralizing their rivals in the region. Upon the

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<sup>44</sup> Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. The Guardian. 1 February 2017. “Battle for Mosul”. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5woZG9fQtqo>

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, “Fighting ISIS”.

taking of Mosul from the retreating Iraqi security forces, IS forces allowed the former-Ba'athist Naqshbandis to take the spotlight, Mosul having been a hotbed of Ba'athist support. The Naqshbandi Army had been planning a similar revolt for some time, since Iraqi security forces had violently suppressed protests in several Western cities nine months previously. One Naqshbandi fighter, Ahmad Rayan, remarked to a reporter, "ISIS is not alone on this battlefield. There are other factions and organizations coordinating with it, for the first time since 2003 – and all have the goal of ending the political process brought about by the US occupiers."

In the Spring of 2014, after succeeding in taking all of Nineveh province and the major city of Mosul, ISIS demanded that the Naqshbandi Army remove the photos of Saddam and other Ba'ath leaders they had begun to display throughout Mosul. They called a meeting between all of the militias in the city, including Ansar al-Sunna and the Mujahideen Army, and demanded that no other emblems but the flag of ISIS be raised, and that ISIS was now in charge of the city and the province. <sup>46</sup> Local reporter Mustafa Habib describes the taking of Mosul from Iraqi government forces:

"A committee made up of former army officers and Baath party officials held a meeting and decided that one of their own, a veteran military man, Hashim al-Jammal, who had fought in the Iran-Iraq war, should be the new mayor of the city. They even decided to ask the foreign fighters who had arrived with the IS group to leave - after thanking them for their efforts, of course. The council saw the changes in Mosul as a revolution by and for local Sunnis, not as an invasion by foreign extremists. However the IS group surprised all of their co-conspirators on the morning of Friday, June 13, 2014, when it refused the council's requests and asked all other factions to swear allegiance to it, or to withdraw and hand over their weapons, under threat of death. The IS group began to target members of the other armed militias, especially those belonging to the Naqshbandi Army, Ansar al-Sunna and the Salahaddin Brigades, who were united in their refusal to swear allegiance to the IS group. Over the past two years, the IS group has continued to

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<sup>46</sup> Niqash. "ISIS Bringing the Baath Party Back – or Are They?" Niqash. Accessed August 02, 2019. <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/3460/>.

arrest or kill any individual associated with the Naqshbandi Army, the former Baath party or the former Iraqi army. A few weeks ago dozens of retired soldiers were arrested by the group and their fate remains unknown. ... The smaller armed groups inside Mosul may well be preparing for the IS group's demise. But they also remain reluctant to cooperate fully with the Iraqi government forces. They worry that the same thing that happened to those Iraqis who cooperated with the US to fight Al Qaeda will happen to them, once the battle has finished. Under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, those Sunni Iraqis who turned against Al Qaeda never received any of the things that they were promised, such as money, security and being absorbed into the official armed forces.”<sup>47</sup>

In all of the Western regions taken by the IS organization, after several months of cooperation the demands of local militias were the same: pledge allegiance to us, or become an enemy. Some did pledge allegiance, with many former Baathists not fully believing in the IS ideology but viewing it as a temporary alliance and a means of gaining regional power. Others refused, and a campaign of assassinations and repressions between ISIS and the local militias ensued over the next three to four years. This situation left the majority of the population of al-Anbar and other Western Iraqi regions in a difficult predicament, between a rock and a hard place. Many strong regional militias in buffer areas between Baghdad and the occupied West elected to attempt to remain cautiously neutral, not pledging allegiance to Daesh but not supporting the coalition against them either, simply defending their territories against any form of armed intruders. Abu Samir al-Jumayli, a leader of the Mujahideen Army in al-Anbar, explains:

“We are against the acts of the hardline Islamic State, and we are also against bombed cars exploding randomly in Baghdad. However we are also opposed to the government's sectarian policies against Sunnis. Our Sunni cities have been destroyed because of the IS group and because of the government. We want to rebuild them and our lives but this is complicated. In 2006 we cooperated with the government to expel Al Qaeda from Sunni

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<sup>47</sup> Habib, Mustafa. "Militias Betrayed By Mosul's Extremists Say They Too Will Have Revenge." Niqash. Accessed April 16, 2019. <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5395/>.

cities, but the government did not keep its end of the bargain. They chased our leaders and arrested us. However the issue of allying ourselves with the IS group is out of the question too, as we are all opposed to them.”<sup>48</sup>

On October 15th 2017, nearly three and a half years after the taking of Mosul by IS, as Iraqi security forces prepared to retake the city of Mosul, the Naqshbandi Army issued a statement calling on the people of Mosul to rise up against IS, and warning the Shia militias not to enter the city. Other smaller local groups also announced their intentions to resist the IS organization, such as the Prophet Yunus Brigades, the Mosul Brigades, Ahrar al-Mosul, and the M group (M for *muqawama* or resistance).<sup>49</sup>

Many relatives of former resistance fighters suffered due to the past affiliations of family members, suffering persecution both at the hands of both IS if they failed to participate, and the Iraqi government who suspected innocent relatives of former fighters of also being active supporters of IS. Government security forces composed lists of individuals wanted for suspicion of aiding or supporting IS, and thus relatives of these individuals also came under suspicion. Often local personal squabbles would turn into accusations of IS affiliation, and thus the process of weeding out the true affiliates through village tribunals becomes ever more complicated.

The strict laws under IS rule regarding the growing of beards and wearing of short pants or robes by all men guaranteed that the innocent civilians and the hardcore supporters would be somewhat indistinguishable in plain clothes. While Iraqis outside of IS territory were well aware of these laws, many apprehended during the fighting were still accused of affiliation solely based

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<sup>48</sup> Habib, Mustafa. "Sunni Muslim Militias Decide They Won't Fight With IS - or The US Alliance." Niqash. Accessed April 14, 2019. <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/3558/Sunni-Muslim-Militias-Decide-They-Won't-Fight-With-IS---or-The-US-Alliance.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> Habib, "Militias Betrayed".

on their appearances. Anger at atrocities committed to relatives and friends by IS was often taken out on locals who may or may not have had anything to do with the IS organization. Many who survived torture at the hands of the IS regime were again tortured by Iraqi security forces post-liberation. The disorganized network of the various security forces and militias put the power to execute apprehended individuals at some of the lowest levels of these organizations, often with little to no oversight. Without ascribing innocence to all apprehended, it is safe to assume that many who were sentenced to death on the spot through extrajudicial killings had likely committed no crime, yet were still executed by petty sovereigns operating as tiny nodes of power in a diffused network of massive violence.<sup>50</sup>

Iraqi security forces and other officials often referred to a certain undefined area of the Anbar as “The Killing Zone,” wherein any individual found alive was assumed to be an ISIS supporter and thus ripe for quick and easy slaughter. Numerous news articles contain references by Iraqi officials and politicians to this vaguely demarcated area, which represents the manifestation of a geographical area completely marked for death. In a news article regarding the transfer of IS fighters from the Syrian-Lebanese border to the Syrian-Iraqi border town of al-Bukamal (or Abu Kamal), Ahmed al-Assadi, a member of parliament and spokesman for the Popular Militia, remarked that, “They have transferred them to the killing zone. They are about 300 fighters, so we are ready to kill all of them.”<sup>51</sup> A news report covering the liberation of Mosul shows two soldiers fighting over the fate of a man captured under suspicion of ISIS

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<sup>50</sup> “Iraq: Chilling Accounts of Torture, Deaths.” Human Rights Watch, November 13, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/19/iraq-chilling-accounts-torture-deaths#>.

<sup>51</sup> Enders, David. “US Attacks ISIL Fighters near Convoy Carrying Fellow Militants.” *The National*, The National, 31 Aug. 2017, [www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-attacks-isil-fighters-near-convoy-carrying-fellow-militants-1.624729?videoId=5754807360001](http://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-attacks-isil-fighters-near-convoy-carrying-fellow-militants-1.624729?videoId=5754807360001).

membership. “Kill him! Kill him! He is Daeshi!” Yells one man at the other who insists otherwise. Alerted to the presence of cameras, they take the man away in a truck, his ultimate fate unclear.<sup>52</sup> Other news reports show locals complaining to the Iraqi military forces about atrocities and other crimes carried out against them by the popular militias, including looting and mass killings of civilians. Despite claims of abuses, in November of 2016 the Popular Militias were given official status by the Iraqi government, as a part of the greater Iraqi security forces. This situation is even more problematic given that much of their funding and leadership comes from Iran, and the largest factions are Iranian-backed former revolutionary militias, such as Hadi al-Ameri’s Badr Organization.<sup>53 54</sup>

With the Popular Militias now an official arm of the Iraqi security forces, many of the largest groups will ostensibly be receiving weapons and funding from both the US and Iran, which was already the unofficial situation. While not all groups are connected to Iran, some being staunchly Iraqi nationalist and simply following the call to action against ISIS of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (himself an Iranian from the northeastern city of Mashhad), the largest and most powerful groups have deep roots in Iran. This also raises the paradox that while the Popular Militias (and through them, Iran) played a major role in eradicating the IS occupation, they also were the major source of retaliatory violence and extrajudicial killings. Furthermore,

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<sup>52</sup> Roussinos, Aris. VICE News. 6 March 2018. “What ISIS Left Behind in Iraq”. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU2OIkChgFM&t=140s&bpctr=1566436949>

<sup>53</sup> Oghanna, Ayman. VICE News. 7 June 2016. “Fighting the Islamic State With Iraq’s Golden Division: The Road to Fallujah”. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6axTxU30yo&bpctr=1566437224>

<sup>54</sup> Salim, Mustafa, and Missy Ryan. “Iraq Gives Militias Official Status despite Abuse Claims.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 26 Nov. 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-makes-militias-official-despite-abuse-claims/2016/11/26/b08710e5-d544-4efa-847c-7bd2fedfe04c\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.001565c26a08](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-makes-militias-official-despite-abuse-claims/2016/11/26/b08710e5-d544-4efa-847c-7bd2fedfe04c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.001565c26a08).

many of the leadership of these groups formed the bulk of the Maliki government and its mass policies of sectarian corruption that led to the rise of IS in the first place. With such shadowy alliances, some of which are quite obvious and others which are murkier and more mysterious than rumors, ghost stories, and political fairy tales, the only truth that becomes evident is that all of the players on this ill-fated chessboard have been for decades locked in a cycle of violence that only perpetuates greater and more horrific reincarnations of previous incidents. Thus the only truth becomes the certainty of more violence, the origins of which become less clear and less important, as those caught in the crossfire find it harder and harder to survive.

No more is this bizarre paradox clearer than in the equipment used by the various militias and military factions fighting for control of Western Iraq. When IS fighters initially took Mosul in early June of 2014, they were reported to have captured a plethora of weapons left behind by the retreating Iraqi security forces, in addition to hundreds of millions of dollars from the city's banks.<sup>55</sup> US-supplied humvees, M-16s, and other weapons intended for use by the Iraqi army became ubiquitous in the hands of IS fighters, who were often seen clutching American machine guns and driving American vehicles in the endless stream of content generated and posted online by IS militants. As the ISIS organization had access to hundreds of millions in stolen funds and most likely outside funding from unknown sources, along with taxes, tolls, fines, and other revenue collected from local populations, they clearly also had the ability to purchase more of these weapons. As the Popular Militias gained prominence in the fight against ISIS, they reclaimed many of these weapons and vehicles after defeating IS battalions. In short, weapons

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<sup>55</sup> Joshi, Shashank. "Iraq, ISIL and the Region's Choices." US & Canada | Al Jazeera. June 12, 2014. Accessed September 02, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/iraq-isil-mosul-2014612121744334979.html>

initially manufactured and supplied by the US for the Iraqi Army fell into the hands of the IS fighters and then were repurposed by Iranian-backed militias who were also receiving support from the Iraqi Army and thus by proxy the US as well.

In all of this we can see that the allegiances of those who hold the guns mean almost nothing, as long as they keep shooting them, In addition, the privatization of militaries into militia groups, moving away from previously established nation states with clearly defined allegiances, shows the ever increasing role of multinational war machines in our globalized modern world. As if this is not enough, we see through this example how blurred the lines between these war machines has now become. As the demarcations between them become almost nonexistent, this series of overlapping war machines points to their greater existence in service to a single overarching death machine, composed of many smaller but equally destructive engines of war, conflict, violence, and destruction.

### Digital Violence

A Sky News report on the network's YouTube channel shows a team covering the liberation of Mosul narrowly escaping an ISIS suicide bomb attack. Before they even finish their report, a video of the attack taken from an IS drone has been posted by the terror group online, and the Sky News team are able to include this footage in their own report about barely surviving the bombing.<sup>56</sup> Another video posted to the YouTube channel "Iraqi Ministry of Defense News," purported to be run by the Minister of Defense, shows a group of Iraqi officers reviewing drone

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<sup>56</sup> Ramsay, Stuart. Sky News. 16 March 2017. "Watch As Sky News crew survives Islamic State suicide bomb explosion in Mosul". Retrieved from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUrnzs\\_M8\\_w&t=43s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUrnzs_M8_w&t=43s)

footage on a large screen in some type of command center. The drone camera hovers over a tiny desert village, where a pickup truck is stopped in the middle of a dirt road. “There were two guys here, who were killed,” explains the operator, “and three of them ran away. Now I’ll find the three that ran away for you.” The drone moves to a different corner of the village, searching for the fugitives. He points to a man running away from the village, “Here! Here’s one of them. There are two more.” The camera’s eye moves to another point, further outside of the village. “Here’s one of them.” The second man is barely visible against the bright sand of the desert, but the image is perfectly clear and in full color. As the drone moves in closer we see him running along a rough desert road, even the small rocks and stones in his path perfectly clear on the screen. “The militia forces are coming now. Here is the third guy.” A humvee enters the screen, cutting off the man’s path. As the camera moves, we see a group of pickup trucks and armored vehicles encircle the other two fleeing men. “This operation was the Popular Militia, the group of Ali al-Akbar. They killed two in the village and captured the other three. One of the terrorists who was with them had a camera and other recording devices with him, with pictures and videos.”<sup>57</sup>

He closes the drone camera and opens a file of video recordings. “This is what we found on them, on their personal cameras.” He plays a video showing an ISIS fighter shooting a heavy machine gun mounted in the back of a Toyota Tacoma pickup truck. He points to the man shooting the gun, “This is one of the guys we captured. This was from his personal device.” Another video shows a group of fighters crouched and preparing for battle. “These are the same

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<sup>57</sup> al-Heyali, Mahmoud. Ministry of Defense of Iraq News. 8 December 2017. “3 ISIS Members Pursued by Iraqi Army and Popular Militia” (Arabic). Retrieved from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBthswsR\\_BQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBthswsR_BQ)

guys.” The video concludes, revealing the background on the desktop. An image of a drone is encircled by Iraqi flags, and the crest of the Ali al-Akbar group, incorporating traditional Shia iconography. This group is not an official division of the Iraqi Army, but an unofficial section of the popular militias. However, they enjoy the use of advanced technology and the sponsorship of the government and powerful officials. Many are funded and even trained by Iran. Hashtags direct YouTube viewers to other videos on the page, and messages remind them “Don’t forget brothers, like, share, subscribe, and visit our Facebook page.” Another video from the page shows the Minister of Defense, Mahmoud al-Heyali, meeting with a former fighter. al-Heyali kisses the man’s son, who is pushing him in a wheelchair, as both the man’s legs up to his lap and all but the thumb of his left hand have been blown off.<sup>58</sup>

The posting of sensitive government material regarding the methods through which they track and apprehend terrorists to highly public social media pages like YouTube and Facebook is a stark indicator of the gross disorganization of the new Iraqi government. One only has to search in Arabic for “dawaesh” on YouTube to be presented with hundreds of hours of cell phone recordings of beatings and interrogations of apprehended individuals suspected to be ISIS fighters or supporters, taken by Iraqi soldiers or members of the popular militias. They often depict captured IS fighters being beaten and executed, with a common scene showing Iraqi security forces celebrating a victory by recording themselves stepping on the faces of slain IS fighters. Other recordings circulated by various members of military groups show interrogations of captured IS fighters and those suspected of participating. They have usually been beaten

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<sup>58</sup> al-Heyali, Mahmoud. Ministry of Defense of Iraq News. 13 April 2018. “Minister of Defense Meets With the Wounded Abbas Mahdi Ibrahim” (Arabic). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3lvN2fQ-jl>

savagely, and it is never clear what their fate is to be when the video ends. One recording shows captured IS supporters cowering in fear as Iraqi officers angrily question them as to their origins. Some answer with the names of local towns and cities, “Mosul,” “Husaybah,” while others struggle to respond in Arabic, “Uzbekistan,” “Tajikistan.”<sup>59</sup> In another video, militiamen have a group of ISIS fighters surrounded in a house. While shooting at the house, a child approaches them. Assuming the child to be a suicide bomber, they begin screaming “The kid! The kid!” and retreat, followed by a large explosion.<sup>60</sup>

Violence has been used as a method of deterrence and an intimidation tactic since ancient times, when severed heads mounted on pikes warned outsiders to keep away. The KKK’s lynching and murdering of African-Americans was meant to create an environment of fear in order to suppress a national minority into submission. It has always played an inherent role in society. Modern technologies also lead to an increase in the savagery and frequency of displays of violence and brutality. Even the most basic of mobile devices possess the capability to record and transmit visual recordings of atrocities instantly transmittable for the world to see. The frequency and availability of such material further normalizes its occurrence while also ensuring that future displays will be marked by even more savage levels of brutality. Videos of ISIS fighters committing atrocities were used as both public relations campaigns and a means of sending a violent message of “beware” to their enemies. Videos posted by security forces of the humiliation and execution of suspected militants sends a similar message to IS supporters.

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<sup>59</sup> al-Nasaari, Ahmad. Ahmad al-Nasaari. “Interrogation of Unsightly ISIS Members” (Arabic). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wG6lKUwI4jc>

<sup>60</sup> Bzargui, Sabir. Sabir Bzargui. 16 June 2017. “More than one suicide bomber in the home of a displaced family” (Arabic). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8JbsrOY0Zo>

An endless stream of horrific violence plays on a never ending loop, with YouTube providing one video after another, based on an algorithm determining relevance to the previously viewed recording. With the click of a button, we are transported to the heart of the battle, or the last moments of a condemned individual's life. While some openly admit to their crimes, others beg for mercy and deny any affiliation, pleading for their lives and swearing they are only bystanders with families. Some only stare in silence as the men holding the cameras curse them for their alleged crimes. Other videos are from bombings and battles, sons and brothers scream and weep as they frantically struggle to rescue a fallen relative. Even if the viewer didn't hoist the bodies into the back of the truck, or dodge the bullets, or smell the decaying corpses, they are easily accessed for all to watch over and over.

While violence may seem to erupt in horrific forms seemingly out of nowhere, in reaction to a political or social event, we can imagine that for this to occur said violence must also be brewing below the surface in one form or another. Perhaps other social and political issues, unaddressed or unsolved and thus slowly stewing over time, reach a boiling point and erupt in the more active form of direct physical violence. Just as energy is never lost but only changes its form, prolonged periods of social or political violence (be it through oppression, neglect, sectarianism, or otherwise) can eventually lead to a breaking point and the outbreak of actual physical and communal violence.<sup>61</sup> This is especially true in the absence of a viable community, nation, and state.

In Gyanendra Pandey's view, violence is no longer the historical aberration it was once viewed as but the current status quo for many parts of the world. For this paradigm to shift back

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<sup>61</sup> Das, Veena. *Life and Words*. (University of California Press: Berkley, 2007), 141-149.

towards the previous historical view many of the machines that now feed on this violence will have to be dismantled and destroyed, a monumental task at the very least. Violence is often a product of “fanatical desperation” and is no longer a historical moment of exception but a “total social phenomenon,” like a social energy, often changing its form but never disappearing altogether. Nationalism, according to Pandey, is the most latent form of social violence, existing during times of peace as a sort of training for the moment of war, or as existing in the absence of a state. Hostile attitudes towards marginalized groups rapidly transform into tolerance for organized collective violence against them. Previously “peaceful” societies rapidly descend into horrific forms of violence as a means of self preservation, often in the rapid formation of an enemy other, or as vengeful retribution for previous suffering. Here we see the rapid shift from social to physical violence, especially when the perpetrators have a misguided belief in the righteousness of a particular side. The failed nature of the new Iraqi state is proof that the liberal nation state is not a natural or sacred entity.<sup>62</sup>

### Martyrs

While the fear of death is everywhere in Iraq, the veneration of martyrs has become in many ways the national pastime. In major cities, it is impossible to walk a few blocks without being bombarded by photos of martyrs, those who gave their lives in defense of their beliefs, not including the images of Husayn that hang from every window and signpost. Were they all defending Iraq? Was their martyrdom for the nation? Many were killed by other Iraqis. The best we can say is that they died for what they believed in, be it a religious or political cause. The

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<sup>62</sup> Pandey, Gyanendra. *Routine Violence*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 4-12.

further society is divided, the smaller these realms of personal defense become. Iraqi social media still venerates the martyrs of the past, circulating videos and songs remembering Communist martyrs, who are almost nonexistent today. Clerics and mullahs give sermons recounting the death of Husayn and extolling the virtues of martyrdom, inspiring young men to pick up guns and join the popular militias. Religious observance directly funds this martyrdom machine. On every street corner in Baghdad hang images of Husayn, Abbas, and others killed at Karbala. Many depict scenes of gratuitous violence, Abbas's arms are cut off and his face is filled with arrows, while Zahraa holds up her dying baby. Banners everywhere proclaim support for Husayn, with blood often dripping from the letters. When death has become part of the culture, and martyrdom a national virtue, it becomes even more difficult to imagine an end to this cycle of death.

In the story of Jesus, he represents the sacrificial lamb, who died so that we may live. We are not meant to emulate him, but to worship him for his martyrdom. However, those who now claim to fight in the name of religion on all sides have created a cult of martyrdom, where self-sacrifice and dying in battle has become almost the goal for many. Faisal Devji's work on "the death of god" posits that since the prophecy of Islam was the final message from God, we are no longer in communication with him, and so these acts of self-sacrifice become a way of proving his existence.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps in a place that has been so devastated and subjected to violence, horror, and trauma, this has become the only way for some individuals to prove to themselves that God still exists. There is now no goal and no end to this bloodshed. Even after the defeat of ISIS, many of the Popular Militias have begun engaging in mafia-style activities, including smuggling,

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<sup>63</sup> Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad*, 124.

extortion, and fighting each other over internal squabbles. <sup>64</sup> It seems to be that once people are used to solving their problems with violence, they will begin using violence to solve all their problems, and when there is seemingly no end to the supply of weapons, this cycle of violence only grows stronger and more devastating.

### Reconstructing the Nation

In her analysis of the rise of the European nation states after World War I, Hannah Arendt writes that, “The worst factor in this situation was not even that it became a matter of course for the nationalities to be disloyal to their imposed government and for the governments to oppress their nationalities as efficiently as possible, but that the nationally frustrated population was firmly convinced - as was everybody else - that true freedom, true emancipation, and true popular sovereignty could be attained only with full national emancipation, that people without their own national government were deprived of human rights.” Arendt cites the French Revolution with aligning the concepts of the declaration of the rights of man with the necessity of national sovereignty. <sup>65</sup>

Here, the homogeneity of the nation and national concept becomes necessary. As Arendt acknowledges, “The representatives of the great nations knew only too well that minorities within nation-states must sooner or later be either assimilated or liquidated.” Since the creation of Iraq, assimilation has been an issue. Since the mandate period and the inception of Iraq under

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<sup>64</sup> Rubin, Alissa J. "Iraq's Militias, Accused of Threatening U.S., Pose a Quandary for Iraq." The New York Times. May 07, 2019. Accessed June 05, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/world/middleeast/iraq-militias-iran-united-states.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Harvest, 1968), 272-273.

British rule, the nation was defined as Arab, with Arabic as its main language and heritage, despite the presence of numerous ethnic and linguistic groups. From the beginning, British census data categorized people according to religion, setting the groundwork for religious and ethnic differences.<sup>66</sup> This categorization was patrilineal, thus discounting the mother's background and the countless inter-sect and inter-ethnic marriages that are still common today. Programs of breaking up minority populations were undertaken by Saddam in his attempts to Arabize the Kurdish north and relocate Kurds to majority Arab areas, a continuation of this policy of creating a homogenous nation. His mass expulsion of Iraqis believed to be of Persian origin contributed to modern Iranian political collaborators and the Badr Organization.

In more recent years, the Kurds in the north have sought to strengthen their control over major cities through various attempts at manipulating demographics, while other minority groups compete for territory and political influence. All of these attempts at fomenting greater assimilation and breaking up national minorities only deepen the divide of sectarian resentment. The unnatural enforcement of new national identities upon previously self-aware and diverse populations thus becomes a losing process. This process has been especially damaging to Christian populations in the northwestern regions. Assyrians and other Christian groups, who have inhabited these lands since before the creation of time and the various Mesopotamian empires, have fled the region en masse in recent years. Despite having arguably the greatest claim to lineage from the ancient kings, who had been a major symbol of Iraqi identity for decades, they are now being driven from Iraq altogether.

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<sup>66</sup> Haj, Samira. *The Making of Iraq, 1900-1963*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 81.

The classification of minorities in the post-World War I era as “national minorities” and not simply minorities created the connection between the presence of a minority and a need for establishing a nation. Previous notions of minorities, both in pre-19th century Europe and pre-Invasion Iraq, were strictly religious and civil, not national and political. In pre-invasion Iraq, while there did exist separate personal status courts for different religious groups to handle matrimonial affairs, this was not a political designation, with any special legal rights attached to it, and there also existed a wholly secular civil court. While the Ba’athist state monitored and restricted Shia activities, this was politically motivated, and internal persecutions at this point were still based on affiliations with political groups, mainly the Iraqi Communist and Shia SCIRI or Dawa parties. According to Arendt:

“The minority treaties said in plain language what until then had been only implied in the working system of nation-states, namely, that only nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions, that persons of different nationality needed some law of exception until or unless they were completely assimilated and divorced from their origin ... They took it for granted that the law of a country could not be responsible for persons insisting on a different nationality.”<sup>67</sup>

Arendt therein illustrates how the state had no longer become an instrument of the law but an instrument of the nation. What is even more dangerous here is the idea that whoever controls the state controls the definition of the nation, and thus the entire nation state project veers towards some exclusion of an other. The state had gone from “an instrument of the law to an instrument of the nation,” and thus whoever controlled it controlled the power of the state and the idea of the nation. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the modern nation-state of

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<sup>67</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 275.

Iraq, taking root during the royal period but arguably established with the 1958 Revolution, culminating in a succession of struggles as to who would be included and who would be excluded and repressed. While the Ba'athist period defined itself and greater Iraqi identity through a cultivated Arab identification along with the Babylonian, Sumerian, Assyrian, and other ancient roots of local civilization, the rise of religious sectarianism post US invasion sparked a rapid process of rewriting and reformulating the basis of national origin along markedly different historical narratives.

Even more dangerously, Arendt makes it starkly clear how easily unwanted groups can now be thrown out of the national narrative. Arendt begins with groups “insisting” on an alternate identity, but she also quickly arrives at the danger of a powerful majority redrawing the historical narrative of a particular minority for means of political and social exclusion. As seen in Iraq and many other sectarian conflicts throughout the region this process can take place “with terrifying swiftness.” While the sectarian conflict in Iraq was incited and exacerbated by outside influences, the population quickly took up the cause and raised the flag, slaughtering their former countrymen and adopting new narratives to define what nationality meant to them.

When individuals are rendered stateless within their own territory, they are unable to be deported elsewhere. It is in these situations that they become outlaws in their own space, and thus the authorities become indifferent in their mistreatment of these unwanted populations. Illegalizing perceived groups of individuals may result in even more illegal attempts to expel them, which in turn can result in retaliation.<sup>68</sup> This is exactly the case for the Iraqis expelled to Iran, first by the British and then by Saddam, only to return to fight his regime and seek control

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<sup>68</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 283.

of the new state after his fall. Much of the leadership of modern Iranian-backed paramilitary groups in Iraq comes from Iraqis believed to be of Iranian origin expelled by Saddam in the 70s, who in turn fought against Iraq in the Iranian army. After 2003, many returned to not only reclaim the state they were expelled from, but also to reform it in their own image, taking revenge on many of those they believed to have expelled them in the process.

The territorial issue becomes a major factor here, as various territories are often subsumed into one nation state but not even occupied by a single majority, but many groups with valid claims to their individual territories. Arendt discusses various methods of dealing with the issue of newly stateless populations, such as population transfers and “repatriations,” and we begin to see the issue of national status as replacing humanity itself, and a phenomenon wherein nations would rather “lose its citizens than harbor those with different views.” In the example of the IS occupation of Western Iraq, these concepts were taken a step further, as many who assumed to be included and thus entitled to the rights of rescue and protection by their state were jettisoned. Instead, they were now seen as worthy of exclusion for the views of their occupiers and oppressors, and the line between refugee and participant was thrown out, and many who hadn’t insisted on anything were thrown into the camp of those denying Iraqi national identity for membership in the Islamic State. The shift in language from “stateless” to “displaced” represents a denial of the plight of the expelled, as the removal of their national protection is not acknowledged, instead referring to them as having lost their place, suggesting they still have a place to one day return to, even when many have no such recourse (or face great violence in doing so).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

Judith Butler makes the suggestion that “states” can and may exist merely as “states of mind” than actual states. Butler posits the need for us to separate the nation from the state in our thinking. While the nation-state acts as tate as the unbinder, banisher, and dispossesser of national minorities, refugees are not always cast out of the state but often transferred to “another mode of belonging.”<sup>70</sup> While Butler describes this process as often occurring during a “state of war,” in the instance of Iraq, it is difficult to determine what constitutes this state of war, and when this war begins and ends. Effectively many parts of Iraq have been living in a state of war since 1980, even longer in the Kurdish areas. Building off of Arendt’s definition of power, we can see the attempts to remove the collectivity of the Iraqi population is an attempt to remove their power, ostensibly as a means of exploiting the wealth of the nation. In the instance of many Western Iraqis under ISIS occupation, we can view them as prisoners of war, yet living in two prisons at once, occupied by the Islamic State and besieged by Iraqi security and coalition forces. Their dispossession is two-pronged, multidirectional.

Butler describes the role a sense of national identity to a nation state, creating a “nation” that is “singular and homogenous, or at least, it becomes so in order to comply with the requirements of the state. The state derives its legitimacy from the nation, which means that those national minorities who do not qualify for ‘national belonging’ are regarded as ‘illegitimate’ inhabitants.” The identity of the nation state of Iraq has undergone an undoing, and now only seems to exist in the collective solidarity of the oppressed. Butler argues that the nation state can “reiterate” its legitimacy by creating the basis of this legitimacy, in the process jettisoning populations deemed to be lacking or wanting of a certain qualification. This can be a

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<sup>70</sup> Butler, Judith, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging*. (London: Seagull, 2011), 2-6.

recurring phenomenon throughout the life of a nation state. This in turn renders all forms of national homogeneity “suspicious.”<sup>71</sup> These forms of dispossession may be marked by expulsion or containment, as evidenced by Saddam’s expulsion of Iraqis of Iranian origin in the late 70s, and the restriction of movements of the populations in the Anbar today. A concurrent example is the relocation of local populations by the Saddam government to destroy regional ethnic majorities.

While bare life is here described as being as exposed to power, this twofold exposure to power is manifested locally by IS occupation and nationally by the Iraqi security forces (with international coalition bombardments representing a third fork of power stabbing itself into the region). However, we may argue that the oppression of ISIS is not power in an Arendtian sense, but only sheer violence (even though IS did earn a measure of local support), while the dispossession of the Western populations by the Iraqi government is exposure to the societal power of those who seek to contain them for suspicion of terrorist sympathies. Recent protests show a mass movement of popular power versus the oppressive violence of the state and, even more specifically, the non-state war machines of the militias. With the state now often simultaneously dealing with the ongoing Kurdish struggle, the de-ISification of the West, and squashing popular uprisings across the country, the nature and role of the state itself becomes dubious, existing only as the protector general of the moneyed political interests centered in the Green Zone. As Butler describes, “These are not undifferentiated instances of bare life but highly juridified states of dispossession”<sup>72</sup> While there had previously existed a massive state of

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<sup>71</sup> Butler, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, 32-33.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

war in the region, with the expulsion of the IS occupation, the dispossession has become juridified, rather than existing as a result of military siege. Butler brings to mind the notion of a new discourse of existence in a non binary environment, a multidirectional dispossession, where there is no good and no evil, only death and survival, and neither narrative provides any truth, salvation, or even a glimpse of light to look towards.

Hannah Arendt highlights a trend towards emerging in the post-WWI period of restricting naturalization while also increasing denaturalization. While the modern concept of a nation state is inherently founded on exclusion, it seems that after the initial founding, further processes of exclusion are still very much at play. Thus the connection between nationalism, prejudice, and factionalism becomes much clearer, as the process of nationalism continues to function as a sort of ethnic cleansing, even after the nation is established. Arendt also acknowledges the rising issue of ideological struggles, wherein individuals may travel abroad to participate in foreign civil wars solely on the basis of ideology, a phenomenon that was the backbone of the IS project.<sup>73</sup>

“For these new states this curse bears the germ of a deadly sickness. For the nation-state cannot exist once its principle of equality before the law has broken down. Without this legal equality, which originally was destined to replace the older laws and orders of the feudal society, the nation dissolves into an anarchic mass of over- and underprivileged individuals. Laws that are not equal for all revert to rights and privileges, something contradictory to the very nature of nation-states. The clearer the proof of their inability to treat stateless people as legal persons and the greater the extension of arbitrary rule by police decree, the more difficult it is for states to resist the temptation to deprive all citizens of legal status and rule them with an omnipotent police.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 275.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

In this one small paragraph Hannah Arendt neatly encapsulates the major issues and flaws of the modern nation state. While founded on principles of equality for all, they rapidly deteriorate into a system of haves and have nots, wherein the have nots are cast aside further and further, until a sort of totalitarian police state eventually forms. As the Iraqi people begin to emerge from the fog of multiple ongoing wars and feel the eroding effects of the capitalist takeover of the national economy in the wake of the disaster of the invasion, the movement against government corruption has begun to rally Iraqis against foreign economic domination (even if it is mainly seen as internal corruption). Concurrently, the acceptance by many of the conditions created by corruption (“hypernormalisation”) has established corruption and exploitation as the status quo.

The complete failure of the post-invasion government resulted in the massive popular protests which began in the summer of 2018 at the lack of basic services, unemployment, and widespread government corruption. The lack of services and employment had never been an issue in Iraq before 2003, with Iraqis enjoying a high standard of living, education, and employment. Beginning in the summer of 2018, massive protests began in Basra and other southern cities over the lack of electricity, water, basic services, and employment, as tens of billions of dollars in oil revenues are pumped out of the southern provinces annually by private corporations with sweetheart contracts that grant tiny fractions of the revenue to the Iraqi state and people. By the fall of 2019, massive protests erupted across the country, bringing life in Baghdad to a standstill. Pitting millions of youth against the security forces and popular militias, many were killed during peaceful protests by private military actors widely accepted as having Iranian backing. Iranian embassies and consulates were torched, and demands were eventually

made for both the complete withdrawal of both the Iranians and the US occupation forces. The defining character of these massive peaceful protests was the collapse of sectarian boundaries, as many young Iraqis recognized that many of those in power were merely exploiting these divisions for personal gain. Signs in public squares banned the use of sectarian labels, and a popular slogan was “We are all Iraq.” One of the most widespread slogans used by the protesters across Iraq was *nereed watan* or “We want a country!”, a widespread acknowledgment of the complete failure of the new government and the relative collapse of the supposed state.

Iraq today exists in a post-theoretical state, wherein various theories of disaster capitalism, globalization, necropolitics, and biopower have begun to collapse into one another. Unlike in 2003, there is no single narrative of invasion/domination and there is no single perpetrator. The various forces pushing and pulling on the Iraqi people are myriad, innumerable, and unidentifiable. Western scholars and analysts may think they have the entire situation figured out, presenting neat maps clearly demarcating sectarian areas of influence, but in reality their clean lines are about as jagged and undefinable as the bloody remnants of a bombing. The damage to the fragile fabric of this society as old as time itself can be seen in the scars carried by thousands, the shrapnel still embedded in backs and legs, and the numerous diseases from water and earth poisoned by heavy metals and depleted uranium that have claimed countless lives.

Beyond physical injury as witness, memory, and history, the psychological trauma of the individual and collective memory of atrocities knows no sectarian boundary, and serves as one of the few uniting factors for Iraqis today. While we may refer to periods as “post-Saddam,” “post-invasion,” “post-ISIS,” ad nauseam, the amount of periods of post-violence only bleed into one

another, reflecting a long and vicious cycle of violence and suffering. This begins to raise questions regarding the nature of the “pre” and the “post,” and the difference between political and historical demarcations of conflict and the actual experience of suffering by people living under conflict. Just as many individuals suffering to survive during the 2003 invasion did not have the luxury of concern for the Western economic exploitation of the state, Iraqis under bombardment during the IS period had little opportunity to contemplate the politics of the bombs falling on their homes. Even now, the unknown origins of many of these bombardments is likely never to be determined.

Without placing blame or guilt on any side, the greater reality of the situation is how deeply the fabric of society has been destroyed by these events, wherein the closest of neighbors can no longer trust each other, despite both of their innocence. Thus even innocent bystanders, trying only to live their simple lives in peace, are thrust as actors into the gears of the war machine, forced to become participants, and prosecuted for crimes of war never committed, executed for the sins of others. Thus the crime becomes merely existence in an occupied space, a space that has now been occupied so many times by so many different forces that it has become unclear as to whom it belongs. Meanwhile, the only true answer lies in the souls of the people who have struggled for centuries to work this land, to cultivate it, and to sustain a culture and existence that from the outside appears to be quite simple, yet in the end proves to be hauntingly complex and beautiful.

## Conclusion

The legacy of violence inflicted upon the sovereign and prosperous nation of Iraq, richer in cultural, national, social, and economic resources than almost anywhere in the world, led to the utter destruction of all of these and more, and the greater decimation of the region. The experimental, never before employed theories of total warfare espoused in the Shock and Awe doctrine were implemented en masse by the invasion forces, and thus the goal of total dominance through massive destruction was wildly successful. The emergence of the Islamic State and other nongovernmental armed military groups only served to continue the legacy of violence and division initiated by the US invasion. As the conditions of massive violence prescribed by Shock and Awe quickly became the status quo for what is now nearly two decades, it becomes clearer that there is no difference between any of these armed groups, as all of these various machines of war and death serve only to propagate and continue the cycle of violence. While they may try to justify themselves through security or religion, at the end of the day they are all violent armed occupation forces, subjecting innocent local populations to unthinkable forms of suffering, and turning neighbors against each other. Through all of this, the myth of the nation state becomes only a tool for “achieving rapid dominance.”

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