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978-0-521-88461-7 - Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance

Dina Rizk Khoury

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Introduction

When U.S.-led forces invaded Iraq in 2003, they occupied a country that had been at war for twenty-three years. September 22, 1980 marked the beginning of an eight-year war with Iran that cost both countries more than a million lives and transformed their social and political landscapes. War's end brought no relief to Iraqis. On August 2, 1990, Saddam Hussain made the disastrous decision to invade Kuwait. In January 1991, a coalition of twenty-eight countries, led by the United States and Britain, initiated a devastating bombing campaign that lasted for forty-two days, destroyed a large part of the Iraqi infrastructure, and caused tens of thousands of deaths. In the immediate aftermath of the First Gulf War, a massive uprising nearly toppled the regime, which in turn unleashed its violence against its own population. Despite the end of hostilities, the imposition by the UN of the most comprehensive embargo ever enforced on a nation, accompanied by periodic bombing by the United States and Britain, was effectively a continuation of war. By the end of the Ba'athist regime in 2003, war had become the norm rather than the exception. The result of this normalization of war has been the militarization of Iraqi politics and society, the brutalization of public culture, and the creation of irreconcilable divisions within Iraq.¹ Yet in the domestic buildup to the U.S.-led invasion, less than a handful of American policy makers, academics, or commentators devoted much analysis to the centrality of the imperatives of war making in shaping the nature of Iraqi state power,

¹ Isam al-Khafaji, "War as a vehicle for the rise and demise of a state-controlled society: the case of Ba'athist Iraq," in Steven Heydemann (ed.), *War, Institutions and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 258–91.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the manner by which the Iraqi regime governed its population, or war's impact on Iraqis' understanding of citizenship and belonging.² This book is an attempt to bring war front and center to the study of Iraq. It focuses on the political, social, and cultural processes and consequences of the normalization of war over more than a generation.

Because the thrust of the analysis presented in this book examines the processes of normalization, I am less interested in war making as a state-strengthening/weakening enterprise than in war as a way of governing that structures everyday lives.³ At the same time, war was central in shaping and transforming the state's institutional and cultural practices.⁴ In addition, the engagement with war and sanctions radically altered Iraqi citizens' social and legal rights and created a culture of commemoration that produced new ways of perceiving and describing community and self. The book tells the story of the normalization of war under the Ba'ath by focusing on key categories of people – soldiers, deserters, prisoners of war, and martyrs' families – all of whose mobilization, control, and acquiescence were central to the state's ongoing ability to wage war and who were therefore the target of myriad state policies.

² A fascination with Saddam Hussain and his politics among policy analysts and commentators helped paint an overly simplistic picture of Iraqi politics that paralleled in many ways Hussain's fascination with himself and his need to project his power. See, for example, Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Words, Political Discourse in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³ There is a rich literature on the role of war making in the formation of early modern European states and societies. The most succinct remains Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 900–1990* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990) and Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). As will become clear throughout this book, I am deeply indebted to Foucault's notions of power as practice and rule as a set of techniques of governing. I am also indebted to the notion of "state effect" elaborated by Timothy Mitchell. Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 87–104 and Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory and Population*, Michel Senellart (ed.), (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Senellart (ed.), (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy and the State Effect," in George Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State Formation After the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 76–97.

⁴ Heydemann (ed.), *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, pp. 1–30. Among the first serious attempts to tackle the role of war in state formation in the Middle East, Heydemann's introduction draws attention to the normalization of war and militarism as a constituent of state–society relations in the region. The focus of most of the articles, however, is on the role of war making in building the state's capacity.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

The first part of the book provides a brief historical context and then analyzes the organizational and bureaucratic practices of the state and the Ba‘th Party in mobilizing and waging the Iran-Iraq and the First Gulf wars as well as surviving the uprising and the embargo. It addresses the evolution of categories of inclusion and exclusion in citizens’ rights based on military service and martyrdom and delineates the everyday practices of Iraqis as they attempted to navigate these ever-changing rights. The second part concentrates on the cultural policies of the Ba‘th, in particular its sponsorship of a visual culture, literary forms, and rituals that glorified the “war experience” and sanctified death. It contrasts the “war experience” propagated by the state with the memories of that experience relayed to me by Iraqi veterans. The concluding chapter explores the ways questions of citizenship, martyrdom, and memory are contested and reshaped by the post-Ba‘th government and Iraqi citizens. I argue that current politics and rhetoric of members of Iraq’s political elite and their detractors are to a significant degree the extension of the politics of the Iran-Iraq war and the Iraqi uprising. Amid the clamor for de-Ba‘thification and the sectarian and ethnic politics of Iraq, few among the leadership are willing to accept their responsibility in creating and perpetuating the politics and culture of militarism and victimization that began with the Iran-Iraq war.

War as Governance

The normalization of war is neither a symptom of Iraqi exceptionalism nor simply a product of the militarism of the Ba‘thist regime. Rather it is a condition Iraq shares with a number of other countries, democratic and authoritarian, in the post-Cold War period. In parts of Africa, the gradual erosion of the political authority and economic resources of post-colonial states has reconfigured African nations into enclaves controlled by warlords.⁵ The fall of the Soviet Union and its satellite states was followed by the proliferation of conflicts that have elicited much commentary on the increasingly ubiquitous links between violence by states and non-state actors and the deployment of economic and political power. In Israel and Palestine, where a state of perpetual war has become the norm, scholars have studied the constitutive role that militarism, occupation,

⁵ Jean François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Béatrice Hilou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, trans. Stephen Ellis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) and Achille Mbembe, *On the Post-Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

Cambridge University Press

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Dina Rizk Khoury

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and resistance play in Israeli state power and the socialization of Israelis and Palestinians.⁶ In Iran, the continued influence of the Iran-Iraq war – termed the “Sacred Defense” by the Iranian government – on politics and society has been examined.⁷ Closer to home, the drastic transformation in the political and legal culture of the United States after September 11, 2001 provides ample evidence of the ways in which war and issues of national security have become integral to the politics of everyday life.⁸

Nonetheless, Iraq’s engagement with war during the last twenty-three years of Ba‘thist rule is unique in many respects. Within that period, the country experienced four different kinds of war: the Iran-Iraq war was a conventional war fought between two nation-states deploying large infantry divisions along national borders; throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, the Iraqi state waged a war of counterinsurgency against sections of its population; the First Gulf War pitted a Third World army with a limited and debilitated military war machine against the military technological prowess of the only surviving superpower in the post-Cold War era; and finally, the UN-sanctioned embargo, which Joy Gordon characterized as an “invisible war,” entailed severe limitation of Iraq’s territorial and economic sovereignty and the deployment of a belligerent

⁶ For a survey of this trend in scholarship on Israel, see Zeev Rosenhek, Daniel Maman, and Eyal Ben-Ari, “The study of war and the military in Israel: an empirical investigation and reflective critique,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 35 (2003), 461–84. See also Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society and the Military* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 208–29, and Neve Gordon, *Israel’s Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). For Palestine, see Yezid Sayigh, “War as leveler, war as midwife: Palestinian political institutions, nationalism, and society since 1948,” in Heydemann (ed.), *War, Institutions and Social Change in the Middle East*, pp. 200–39, Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and Nasser Abufarha, *The Making of the Human Bomb: The Ethnography of Palestinian Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁷ Haggay Ram, *Myth and Mobilization in Revolutionary Iran: The Use of the Friday Congregational Sermon* (Lanham: American University Press, 1994), Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging the Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (London: Booth-Clibborn editions, 2000), Christopher de Bellaigue, *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs: A Memoir of Iran* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), Farideh Farhi, “The antinomies of Iran’s war generation,” in Lawrence Potter and Gary Sick (eds.), *Iran, Iraq and the Legacies of the War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 101–20, and Roxane Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁸ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), Carlo Galli, *Political Spaces and Global Wars*, Elisabeth Fay, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), and Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion, Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Cambridge University Press

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Dina Rizk Khoury

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

humanitarianism that threatened the biological security of entire civilian populations.⁹

Clearly, the process of rendering these seismic ruptures in Iraqis' lives into part of the business of living was no small undertaking. How did the imperatives of war making, counterinsurgency, and embargo survival affect the deployment of the state's power and resources? What kind of social, security, and cultural practices did its various bureaucracies develop in the face of these different forms of war? How did war change the politics of everyday life and redefine the parameters of acquiesce and resistance among Iraqis?

Until the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, Ba'athist state policies had been ordered by the twin political and social policies of development and corporatism. Ba'athist society was organized vertically by political party, professional, and labor organizations that mobilized the population over political and social agendas and linked the population directly to the state. The Iraqi state, with the help of the Ba'ath Party, managed labor and professional organizations, disbursed resources, and oversaw what it perceived as the modernization and welfare of its citizens.¹⁰ As a state focused on development, the primary target of its policies were social categories of people like women, children, workers, peasants, illiterate citizens, intellectuals, and youth. As a one-party state, it framed rights of access to citizens' social and economic rights in both negative and positive terms. Citizens enjoyed these rights only if they did not belong to categories of people deemed threatening to the security of the party and the state. These included members of outlawed political parties and their families and those who belonged to certain ethnic groups. On the positive side, citizens' rights granted to those who served the state in desired ways, notably by belonging to the Ba'ath party hierarchy, had privileges denied to others.

To undertake development and to ensure that access to resources was apportioned according to political and security concerns, the Ba'athist state, flush with the rents accruing to it from the nationalization of the oil industry in 1972, expanded its bureaucracies that dealt with the population's welfare and with state security. As Partha Chatterjee has succinctly

⁹ Joy Gordon, *Invisible War, The United States and The Iraq Sanctions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Peter and Marion-Farouk Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*, revised edition (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001) and Eric Davis, *Memories of State, Politics, History, and Collective Memory in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 148–75.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88461-7 - Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance

Dina Rizk Khoury

Excerpt

[More information](#)

put it, the object of the developmental and welfare state was not the individual citizen with universal political equal rights but rather a multiplicity “of population groups that are objects of governmentality – multiple targets with multiple characteristics, requiring multiple techniques of administration.”¹¹ It is at the level of “multiple techniques of administration,” as targets of both the state’s development and security policies, that Iraqis encountered the state in their everyday lives and experienced the full impact of the different wars over the last twenty-three years of Ba’thist rule.

The onset of the war with Iran transformed the nature of the Iraqi state. No longer able to allocate resources to development, it poured its resources into financing the war. In an incisive but schematic article on the relationship of war making to state power in Iraq, Isam al-Khafaji has argued that the war with Iran transformed the Iraqi state from one dependent on oil rents to one dependent on “strategic rents,” based on its ability to pose as the defender of the “eastern flank of the Arab nation” and to extract funds from oil-rich Gulf states fearful of the spread of Iran’s brand of revolutionary Islam. As a result, its developmental and corporatist policies were jettisoned in favor of policies geared toward the militarization of its population and a personalized and paternalistic form of power dominated by Saddam Hussain. al-Khafaji, among others, points to the weakening of state capacity as a result of the Iran-Iraq war, a weakening that escalated into failure after the First Gulf War.¹²

More significant, and less well studied, are the implications of war making on the nature of the Iraqi state’s bureaucratic practices. The administrative bureaucracies of the state, the party, and the military now focused on managing the state’s national security and on counterinsurgency concerns. However, because war making is as much about managing population and territory as it is about the allocation and disbursement of resources, a primary concern was the recruitment and retention of men and the control of the insurgent territories in the northern and south-eastern part of the country. Thus, to understand how this transformation from a developmental and corporatist to a national security and counterinsurgency state affected ordinary Iraqi lives, we need to look at how the “techniques of administration” of the state and party bureaucracies

¹¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed, Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 35–6.

¹² al-Khafaji, “War as a vehicle for the rise and demise of a state-controlled society” and Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 193–292.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88461-7 - Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance

Dina Rizk Khoury

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

evolved during wartime. Central to this change was the expansion, bureaucratization, and securitization of the Ba‘th Party, the only legal political party in Iraq. Equally important was the shift in the categories of people targeted by the social and security policies of the state. Soldiers, deserters, insurgents, and martyrs’ families became the primary objects of state policies.

The Iraqi state was able to wage the longest war fought in the twentieth century, and to do so with a relatively small population and little previous experience in prolonged warfare. That it was able to do so is largely attributable to the state and the Ba‘th Party’s ability to develop institutional and organizational practices that transformed war into the politics and practice of everyday life. The Ba‘th Party became the means of organizing society to fight both internal and external enemies. Thus, the most noticeable change in the politics of the regime during the Iran-Iraq war was the transformation of the Ba‘th Party from a corporatist party with an agenda focused on economic and social development to a national security and counterinsurgency party. It became involved in monitoring dissent, organizing popular committees in support of the war, monitoring correct political behavior at the front, and punishing deserters and absentees. In both the Kurdish north and in the southern areas of Iraq, the party became the clearinghouse for counterinsurgency operations against rebellious populations.

Throughout the 1980s, the Ba‘th remained central to governance. Despite the diminishing strength of its ideological appeal, Ba‘thist cadres developed techniques to survey citizens, particularly those directly affected by the war, and manage their social lives. They mediated between the population and various state institutions and ensured that claims and complaints by soldiers’ families, prisoners of war, and martyrs were heard. The extent to which Iraqi citizens framed their daily struggles in terms of complicity or resistance to the regime was quite limited. For most of Iraq’s population during wartime, the Ba‘th Party, to use Derek Sayer’s phrase, defined the “boundaries of the possible.”¹³ Within these boundaries, most of the politics of everyday life during wartime was shaped by the negotiation over specific claims to entitlements rather than politics writ large. This was politics conducted in increments, but politics nonetheless.

¹³ Derek Sayer, “Everyday forms of state formation: Dissident remarks on hegemony,” in Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent (eds.), *Everyday Forms of State Formation; Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 375.

Cambridge University Press

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Dina Rizk Khoury

Excerpt

[More information](#)

This is not to say that outright resistance to the Ba‘thist regime did not exist. But that resistance did not take the form of organized party opposition, except in the insurgent Kurdish north and on the southeastern borders with Iran. It manifested itself most clearly with significant resistance to the war and took the form of desertion, dereliction of duty, or surrender to the enemy. Other, more subtle forms of resistance took place as well, most notably through the organization and attendance of Shi‘i rituals of mourning. Thus, despite the extension of party and state control over the population, the hegemony of both was at all times tenuous. The need on the part of both party and various security apparatuses of the state to resort to violence to control men and territory points to the limits of state power rather than its hegemony.

The brittleness of the regime and the limits of obedience of the Iraqi population were on exhibit during and after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The First Gulf War, the March 1991 uprising, and the ensuing sanctions imposed on the regime led to drastic reworking of the institutional and organizational practices of Ba‘thist rule. Commentators who have attempted to make sense of Iraqi politics in the last thirteen years of Ba‘thist rule have focused on the “re-tribalization” of Iraqi politics and the rise of sectarianism.¹⁴ However, the most persuasive presentation of Iraqi form of rule in the 1990s is that it was despotic and marked by extreme improvisation. It drew on tribalism, sectarianism, Ba‘thism, and a host of new categories to reward and punish its citizens.¹⁵ The result was a method of rule that oscillated between charity and mercy. The regime created a market of entitlements in titles, positions, and access to precious resources that transformed the relationship of the state to the party as well as to citizens. It made access to these entitlements dependent on the charity of the ruler and on his ability to reward and punish. The corruption and the privatization of entitlements that ensued, together with the enactment of multiple laws and regulations governing reward and punishment, created what can aptly be described, following Slavoj Žižek, as a “regime of mercy.” Writing about the greatly weakened regimes of the Eastern Bloc in the 1980s, Žižek draws our attention to the techniques of

¹⁴ Amatzai Baram, “Neo-tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein’s tribal policies 1991–1996,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 29 (1997), 1–31 and Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, pp. 253–71.

¹⁵ David Baran, *Vivre la Tyrannie et lui Survivre, L’Irak en Transition (Living Tyranny and Surviving It: Iraq in Transition)* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2004), pp. 27–149. For the improvisational nature of postcolonial regimes, see Achille Mbembe, “The banality of power and the aesthetics of vulgarity in the post-colony,” *Public Culture*, 4 (Spring 1992), 1–30.

Introduction

9

these regimes in devising laws that criminalized so many aspects of public life that they assigned potential guilt to almost every citizen. These laws were not meant to be implemented in any consistent fashion but rather were designed as a projection of the rulers' power through their ability to forgive infractions and be merciful.¹⁶ In Iraq, together with the creation of expensive spectacles in support of the regime's pronouncements, these methods of rule projected state power even as they highlighted its episodic presence in Iraqis' lives.¹⁷

By the time of the Ba'athist regime's fall in 2003, the Iraqi state and the Ba'ath Party had devised a variety of practices to rule Iraq's population. The first part of the book analyzes these practices and argues that they helped normalize war and left a profound imprint on the manner in which the Iraqis targeted by state policies resisted these policies and made claims on the state's resources.

The War Experience and Memory

Soon after the outbreak of hostilities of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi state media began propagating a view of the war experience (*tajrubat al-harb*) as formative of the Iraqi citizen and subject. The war experience and its meaning became the cornerstone of the Iraqi state's attempts to transform the Iraqi self, particularly the male self. Attempts at shaping the public culture of heroism and manliness and of death and mourning were regulated by incorporating war celebrations with commemoration rituals under the purview of neighborhood party officials. Educational, cultural, and media institutions and organizations contributed to the creation of what can best be described as a memory discourse that set the parameters within which Iraqi soldiers and intellectuals narrated their war experience. These parameters were challenged after the First Gulf War, which brought massive violence and displacement of large sections of the Iraqi population.

Until the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqis had no experience with total war. In contrast to Western Europe, where death for the nation was sanctified in the nineteenth century by national governments and various civic organizations, the creation and dissemination of the war experience as constituting an essential part of the Iraqi self was a strictly state-controlled enterprise. Unlike the European case where volunteers and their communities

¹⁶ Zizek, *On Violence*, pp. 158–9.

¹⁷ This aspect of spectacle in weak states is nicely formulated by Lisa Wedeen as “acting like a state” in her article, “Seeing like a citizen, acting like a state: exemplary events in unified Yemen,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45 (2003), 680–713.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88461-7 - Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance

Dina Rizk Khoury

Excerpt

[More information](#)

played an important part in the cultural and commemorative practices that characterized what George Mosse has called the “myth of the war experience,” the Iraqi state monopolized literary output as well as commemoration of fallen soldiers.¹⁸ As Iraq had no prolonged experience of war on which its leadership could build, it had to invent what constituted the war experience. It drew on the militant liberationist ideology of the Ba‘thist version of Third Worldism, with its anti-imperialist rhetoric and emphasis on the need to create “new men and women,” and molded this message to convince Iraqis that war with Iran was an extension of the Ba‘thist revolution. It also drew on the visual and literary cultural output that had developed around the world wars in Western Europe and the Soviet Union.

The promotion of a heroic narrative of the war experience was a conscious policy articulated by the Ba‘th leadership and by Saddam Hussain in an effort to link the war with what it called the “generation of the revolution,” whose war experience was to mark a new phase in the heroic advancement of the Ba‘thist nation. In doing so, the government sought to address the urgent questions raised by the war regarding its legitimacy as a liberationist Third World state committed to modernization and social distribution of wealth. The erosion of its support, particularly among intellectuals, was born out of its suppression of leftist opposition within the Ba‘thist Party itself and from its liquidation of the Communist and Shi‘i Islamist parties in the late 1970s. It was compounded by its policy of controlled privatization that challenged the “socialist” program espoused by a significant portion of its membership in the early 1970s and supported by the Communist Party. In addition, the war with Iran further strained Iraq’s credentials as a revolutionary anti-imperialist beacon of Arab nationalism confronting Zionism. Instead, the Ba‘thist regime now faced fighting a popular revolutionary state more anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist than itself.

To propagate the official version of the war experience, state cultural institutions and party organizations disseminated a memory discourse that sought to construct and regulate the Iraqi experience of military and other war-inflicted violence. Unlike the project to manipulate the historical memory of Iraqis for the purposes of shaping public culture analyzed by Eric Davis, the memory discourse initiative marked an ambitious attempt by the state to regulate the inner emotional self of the Iraqi

¹⁸ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers, Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).