Introduction

The modern history of Iraq is a history of the ways in which the people who found themselves living in the new Iraqi state were drawn into its orbit. The creation of a state centred on Baghdad in 1920–1, with its frontiers, its bureaucracy and its fiscal system, established a new framework for politics, embodying distinctive ideas about government. Controlled first by British and then by Iraqi officials, the state made new demands upon its inhabitants, causing people to rethink existing political identities, values and interests. Sometimes these were adapted to serve the state and its rulers; sometimes they were marginalised or suppressed. The history of the state, therefore, is in part a history of the strategies of co-operation, subversion and resistance adopted by various Iraqis trying to come to terms with the force the state represented. It has also been a history of the ways the state transformed those who tried to use it. These different forms of engagement over the years shaped the politics of Iraq and contributed to the composite narrative of Iraq's modern history.

Throughout this process, two important features emerge. The first is the power of the state to act as a centre of gravity, gradually drawing people into a field of distinctively *Iraqi* politics. This is connected to the second feature – the narratives used by Iraqis to understand and to justify their political engagement over time. 'Narratives' here mean the accounts people give of themselves and others in relation to the state, as well as to their efforts to make the history of that state conform to their self-image. It is both an imaginative construct and an organising principle, embodied in the way power is handled by those in a position of command. For them the goal has been to ensure that their account – and their account alone – of Iraq should triumph and become both the prism through which all Iraqis must see their country and the measure used to judge its rulers.

From the moment of the foundation of Iraq in the 1920s, it was clear that there were very different ideas about its future. Across the country as a whole, the boundaries between these ideas shifted as different groups,

variously empowered, tried to assert control, to bring others in line with their own vision for Iraq. Over the course of Iraqi history, these visions have been contrasting and competing. The British mandatory authorities during the 1920s, tribal shaikhs under monarchy and republic, Arab nationalists since the 1930s, Shiʿi *ʿulama* throughout this period, the Iraqi Communist Party during its heyday in the 1950s and early 1960s, the Kurdish parties in their struggles with each other and with the central authorities, Saddam Husain and the Baʿth party into the twenty-first century and, most recently, the United States and the forces its brief occupation brought to the fore – all have left their imprint on the story of Iraq.

Marking all these eras of Iraq's history has been a powerful tendency for politics to be seen chiefly as a way of disciplining the population to ensure conformity with the rulers' visions of social order. Even those who challenged established order have been as authoritarian in their outlook. Of course, many Iraqis have tried to champion instead the idea of politics as civility, advocating a framework of laws and a shared space for political activity. A minority view in Iraq's political history, this tendency has appeared intermittently under particular circumstances, but has generally been overwhelmed by people organised according to very different notions of trust, where the community is not one of citizens, but of family and clan members, fellow tribesmen, co-sectarians or conspirators. They have seen the state as the guarantor of their own privileges, giving them advantages over the bulk of the Iraqi population.

It is here that the various narratives associated with Iraq's political history come into play. They tell us something about the ways in which different groups have identified themselves and highlight some of the main political struggles, as one version of the Iraqi state was asserted over another. In Iraq, as elsewhere, power can create its own pragmatic as well as normative grounds for acceptance, despite reservations about its legitimacy. This can be seen in Iraqi history as dominant narratives are eroded when a shift in power occurs.

One example has been the changing idea of the 'tribe' and the 'tribal shaikh' in Iraqi history. They have played various roles under different regimes, many of which have tried to use them to extend the power and reach of the centre. In these circumstances, they have been incorporated into the narrative of the regime in question, whether in Hashemite Iraq under the monarchy, the Iraq of Saddam Husain or the fragmented Iraq that emerged after 2003 under US auspices. Other regimes have tried to write the tribal leaders out of the story of Iraq. However, in all cases the very attention paid to the questions of lineage and status associated with

tribal identity has helped to transform them, inscribing into the notion of 'tribal identity' different meanings for individual Iraqis at different moments of their history. Similarly, ethnic and sectarian categories such as 'Kurd', 'Shi'i' or 'Sunni' have not only meant different things politically over time, but have also been used in a variety of ways, by government and opposition alike.

Nowhere have these transformations, and the associated dilemmas and contradictions, been better captured than in the story of the majority Shi'i 'community' of Iraq. Iraqi history shows that the Shi'a may comprise the major part of the Iraqi population, but they are not a single political community. Yet for much of this time the political activities of many Shi'a could hardly be understood outside the context of a state that was dominated, since its inception, by small cliques drawn from the minority Sunni Arabs of Iraq. This led to the strategies of resistance marking the restive 'Shi'i politics' of the 1920s and the 1930s. It was then that the authority of the *mujtahids* of Najaf, Karbala and al-Kazimiyya was linked to powerful rural, tribal interests in southern Iraq and helped to mobilise large numbers of urban and rural Shi'a, working together.

However, since that time, changes in the condition of the state have brought out different, sometimes opposing, currents in 'Shi'i politics'. Some identified with Arab nationalism, in the belief that this could bridge the gap with the Sunni Arabs and finally grant the Shi'a equality of opportunity. Others believed this could best be achieved through a distinctively Iraqi nationalism. Many, of course, still revered their leading *mujtahids*, but the increasingly dominant narrative of ethnic Arab nationalism meant that large numbers of Shi'a were torn between their respect for their communal leaders – often Persian by origin – and their desire to play a full part in the life of the Iraqi state. If they moved too close to one side, they found themselves condemned by the other.

For some, this led to wholesale rejection of the authority of the *mujtahids*. They turned instead to secular, radical forms of politics, informed by their awareness of the miserable condition of the majority of Shi'a. For others, the conclusion was to adopt a modern, activist but Islamist political stance. This was equally radical in its implications for the established Shi'i *mujtahids*, but by the 1970s it was a distinct and powerful voice among the Shi'a of Iraq, coming to dominate Iraqi politics in the aftermath of the fall of the dictatorship of Saddam Husain. Many Shi'a who had pragmatically sought accommodation with the narrow clique that had controlled the state for nearly forty years discovered a political identity focusing on communal solidarities. This seemed to provide a reassuring

and empowering narrative in the new world of representative politics after 2003.

The history of the state is but one history among many which help explain the politics of Iraq and of the Iraqis. In this study it is the principal focus. Other histories – of different individuals, families, groups, communities and political parties which make up the Iraqi population – are of course no less valid. However, for the purposes of this study they will be examined largely for the ways in which they may have become entangled in the narrative of those who have tried to dominate the state as an apparatus and to appropriate it as an idea.

Some of those who have ruled Iraq owed their existence to the formation of the state itself, such as the officers who had served under the sharif of Mecca during the First World War and who formed the backbone of the new Iraqi army in the 1920s. Others emerged from the economic changes that touched all sectors of Iraqi society during the twentieth century, such as the great landlords under the monarchy. Still others, such as the Kurdish or Shi'i leaders, or the rural clans that came to dominate the Iraqi security forces under the Ba'th, are rooted in older communities, drawn into the field of Iraqi politics which has nevertheless changed them in various ways. Thus the state has often been captured by distinct groups of Iraqis, but it has also reconstituted social identities through the logic of state power. In neither case has the process been complete. Nor has it always been clear which logic has been the dominant one – that of state power, or that of the group which happens to be in the ascendant. It is this very ambiguity which is characteristic of the modern history of Iraq and has given rise to the 'shadow state' – the web of associates, patrons and power brokers which penetrates, underpins and has often undermined public state institutions. The resilience and adaptability of the networks and the often unspoken rules on which they have been based have defied and subverted various attempts at institutional reform, whether under monarchy, dictatorship or in the brief periods of parliamentary life.

Equally distinctive and possibly related to this feature has been the fact that neither the state nor those who have commanded it have managed to ensure that the multiple histories of the Iraqis are subsumed into a single narrative of state power. Despite the resources available to them and their sometimes ferocious methods, Iraq's rulers have had little success in forcing the histories of Iraq's various communities to conform with their own timetables and objectives. Indeed, the logic of political survival has often dictated otherwise. The exploitation of fracture lines within the population and restrictive understandings of political trust have kept hierarchies of

status and privilege intact, subverting the very idea of a national community in whose name successive governments have claimed to act.

To some degree the same has also been true of class identities, the other social category most commonly associated with the modern state and influential in shaping the way any contemporary state is viewed. Whether class is defined as indicating a person's relationship to the ownership or to the control of the means of production, the complicating factor has always been to identify it either as a conscious or an underlying motive of political action. In Iraq, the definition of people's interests with regard to property or the lack thereof has certainly played an important part in politics. However, even where it has been important in understanding people's actions, it has not been comprehensive enough to justify the claim that a class exists as a political actor. The groups that could justifiably be said to act collectively in politics have been smaller and more particular, their boundaries determined not by their place in the division of labour in Iraq, but by their sense of where they stand in relation to the status map of Iraq's inhabitants, and to the dominant power within the state.

In this account of the troubled narrative of the state of Iraq, three interlinked factors stand out. The first is the resilience of patrimonialism, with all it has meant for the relationship between social formations and the organisation of state power. The networks of patrons and clients throughout Iraqi society have been decisive in the political history of the state, from the people who associated themselves with the Hashemite regime in the early years, through the groups that clustered around Saddam Husain to the various factions that have colonised the state machinery in the aftermath of his demise. This process has been associated with the rise and fall and rise again of 'tribal' politics, the demographic shift from countryside to city, the consequent 'ruralising' of the political universe and the resurgence of local and communal politics to contest the power of the centralised state after 2003. Communities of trust have formed and reformed, marked by wariness and often fear of other similar groups in a political arena the rules of which have been made by the strongest. In these circumstances, patrimonialism has been a way of guaranteeing narrative consistency, founded on the belief that those who share your identity or are heavily dependent on you must to some degree share your fate. This explains why such ruthless energy has gone into keeping these ties alive and in ensuring that other principles do not prevail. It also shows that identity politics are not based on some unchanging 'tradition', but are deeply implicated in material interests, reinforcing the pragmatic reasons for accepting one narrative over another.

These processes have been greatly enhanced by the second factor: the shifting basis of the political economy of Iraq as oil revenues became increasingly important, delivering massive and unprecedented financial power into the hands of those who had control of the state. It might be argued that this enhanced the autonomy of the state in Iraq, but it also reinforced particular conceptions of the state held by those in a position to direct its future, from Nuri al-Saʿid to the Shiʿi Islamist parties and the Kurdish nationalists more recently. The economic foundations of power in Iraq have shaped relationships between those who control the state revenues and various sectors of Iraq's population. They have also informed a number of ideological debates about the future of the country. Most importantly, whether the currency was land or oil rents, for much of Iraq's history they reinforced the patrimonial ties which have made the majority of Iraq's population dependent on those who have taken control of the centre.

The third factor is similarly connected with the other two: the part played by violence in the brief history of Iraq. Any state is to some extent an organisation that disciplines and coerces. In Iraq, the imposition of a political order that challenged existing values and interests, or that created and maintained systems of privilege, has meant a readiness to use coercion from the outset. Beginning with British ideas of order, the use of violence to suppress dissent, much of which took violent form itself, has been reproduced by central governments in Baghdad since the foundation of the state. Indeed, control of the means of coercion has been one of the lures for those who seized the state apparatus, resulting in the prominence of the armed forces which introduced a baneful logic to Iraq's political life. In the circumstances of insurgency and communal strife that pushed Iraq towards civil war after 2003, this was played out in a fractured political world where militias, rebels, foreign troops and proliferating security forces at the disposal of different factions of the government reinforced the grammar of violence, costing thousands of Iraqi lives.

Examination of these themes – patrimonialism, the political economy of oil and the use of violence – will form threads of argument throughout the book. However, for the sake of clarity, a chronological framework will be followed. Within this chronological framework, with its various implications for the narratives of different communities in Iraq, the three themes outlined above will be explored. More generally, it will trace the continuing tension between the efforts by ruling elites to organise various elements of Iraq's population according to their own ideas of political order and desirable social peace – and the forms of resistance, indifference or acceptance they found in the framework of the state that they were trying to

impose. The attempt by successive Iraqi governments to dominate all three of these spheres of political life in the name of a single hegemonic principle has been a marked feature of the composite narratives of the Iraqi state. Furthermore, the lengths to which they will go in a political game with few rules may help to explain the depth and bitterness of the conflicts which have characterised the history of this state in often terrible ways.

CHAPTER 1

The Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the lands that were to become the territories of the modern state of Iraq were gradually incorporated into the Ottoman Empire as three provinces, based on the towns of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. The term *al-ʿIraq* (meaning the shore of a great river along its length, as well as the grazing land surrounding it) had been used since at least the eighth century by Arab geographers to refer to the great alluvial plain of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, a region known in Europe as Mesopotamia. It was here that the Ottoman sultans were extending their own domains during these years and trying to check the ambitions of the Safavid shahs of Persia. Imperial and doctrinal rivalries between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shiʿi Safavids touched the histories of the peoples of these frontier lands, requiring strategies of accommodation or evasion from their leaders and affecting them in a variety of ways. The political world that resulted was a complex and fragmented one. Centres of power existed in many cases autonomously, interacting under shifting circumstances that gave advantage now to one grouping, now to another, and in which the control of the central Ottoman government in Istanbul gradually diminished. Instead, initiative and power lay with those who could command the forces needed to defeat external and internal challengers alike.

POWER IN THE THREE PROVINCES

At the summit of the systems of power in the three provinces stood the military elite of *mamluk* pashas who acknowledged the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan, but were increasingly beyond his control. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, a succession of powerful Georgian *mamluks* (taken as boys from Christian families in Georgia and converted to Islam) ruled Baghdad, often extending their rule to the province of Basra as well. In addition to managing the military forces at their disposal and defending

their domains from Persians and others, they needed to maintain alliances with the powerful Arab tribal chieftaincies which pressed in upon Baghdad and Basra. Meanwhile, in the north, the local dynasty of the Jalili had entrenched itself as overlords of Mosul, and a number of semi-independent Kurdish principalities, most notably that of the powerful Baban dynasty of Sulaimaniyya, dominated the Kurdish mountains. In the centre and the south the shaikhs of the great Arab tribal confederations of the Muntafiq, the Khazaʿil, the Zubaid and the Banu Lam, as well as of large and powerful tribes, such as the Shammar, the Fatlah and the al-Bu Muhammad, commanded forces that could often prove more than a match for those of the pashas of Baghdad or Basra. However, they could also be useful allies against the Persians or against other tribes reluctant to pay the tribute on which the patronage and thus much of the power of the *mamluk* pashas depended.

The *mamluk* pashas ruled over a tributary system. The main function of government was to maintain them and their entourage in an appropriate style by extracting the revenues which would enable them to service their clients and to defend the system against all challengers, internal or external. Thus, taxes were levied on rural communities within reach of the major towns and tribute was forthcoming from those tribal leaders who found it advisable to keep on good terms with the power that the most successful of these *mamluk* pashas could command. These funds were supplemented by the dues charged on goods in transit through Mesopotamia, increasing during the eighteenth century as trade developed with the British East India Company, in particular.

The attitude of these pashas to the Ottoman Empire was formally correct: the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan was acknowledged in the coinage, in the Friday prayer and in other outward symbols of state. The pashas of the three provinces were also careful to obtain imperial confirmation of their position as *vali* (governor). However, they were less ready to accept material limitations on their rule. Appointees from Istanbul served on their staff, but only in subordinate positions. Imperial Janissary troops were stationed in Baghdad, but the pashas kept them under their direct command and ensured that their own elite force of *mamluks* could always subdue them. Tribute was sent to Istanbul, but irregularly.

In their dealings with the inhabitants of the three provinces the Georgian *mamluks* did not differ much from the ruling elites of the Ottoman Empire more generally. Their methods were those of contemporary Ottoman administration, whether in the realm of tax-farming (*iltizam*), customs charges, raising armed forces or enforcing the will of the governor and, by

association, that of the Ottoman sultan. Doctrinally, there was no taint of heresy to challenge the authority of the Ottoman sultan-caliph. Nor was there any desire on the part of the *mamluks* to change the established hierarchies of the many communities and societies that comprised the social fabric of the empire. They simply wanted to dominate them.

Taken as a whole, the inhabitants of the three provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra provided as broad a spectrum of social and communal structures as anywhere in the empire. In the Kurdish-speaking areas of the north and north-east of Mosul and Baghdad provinces, dynastic, parochial and tribal identities and loyalties shaped the lives of the inhabitants. Also important was the influence of the Sufi orders – most notably the Qadiri and increasingly the Naqshabandi – which lent to the observance of Islam in these regions a distinctive character, strongly shaped by Kurdish shaikhs and *sayyids*. Also prominent in this region were the communities of Yazidis (Kurdish-speaking adherents of the syncretic religion of Yazidism), of Christians and of Shi'a, some Kurdish and some Turkmen. These features, as well as broader linguistic differences and geographical isolation, had led to the emergence of a number of local lordships and small principalities which enjoyed complex and shifting relations with each other and with the Ottoman and Persian Empires, the borders of which they straddled.

In the Arabic-speaking districts of Mosul province, the rural population was divided among sedentary and nomadic tribal groups, engaged in agriculture or pastoralism, with some profiting from the opportunities offered by the transit trade. Here too, strong tribal and local attachments coloured everyday life and helped to create distinct communities with particular identities and practices, linked by real or imagined bonds of kinship. These determined the relationship of individuals to the land and shaped the hierarchies of clans and families in the various settlements. Leadership was decided on this basis, but the size and remoteness, as well as the economic and military capacities, of the community in question would determine the power of the leader relative to that of the local Ottoman governor and the degree of autonomy he could therefore enjoy. For the majority of the members of such communities, any contact with the Ottoman state would be mediated by the leading family, encouraging worlds of difference to emerge in the views that people held of the histories of which they formed a part.

By contrast, Mosul itself was a much more directly integrated part of the Ottoman imperial system. Powerful local families, such as the Jalili, as well as prominent families of *ashraf* such as the 'Ubaidi, dominated certain quarters of the town. Reflecting to some degree the composition of the surrounding countryside, the population was predominantly Sunni Arab,