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ROUNDTABLE: IRAQ TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE US INVASION

Sovereignty and Nationalism in Contemporary Iraq through the Memory of the 1991 Uprising

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Modern nation-states typically strive to define the cultural memory of a society by promoting certain historical narratives through mass media, museums, monuments, education, national holidays, and the like. Although huge differences exist between states in the realm of cultural policies, they usually entail the marginalization of certain groups or collective memories and often mark their exclusion from the imagined national collective.¹ But even if publicly suppressed or silenced, the collective memory of marginal groups continues to thrive in the private sphere or in protected social niches.² The dichotomy between public and private memory is not rigid, as state hegemony in the sphere of cultural memory fluctuates and is rarely complete.³

This essay discusses questions of collective memory in post-2003 Iraq. Neoliberal economic prescriptions and cultural and political norms, combined with the destruction of the Iraqi state by the US led invasion in 2003 and subsequent events, have significantly affected collective memory in Iraq. The homogenizing state-sponsored discourse of the Ba`thist era has evolved into a highly pluralized and disparate landscape of competing strands of collective memory.⁴ Although previous historical narratives concerning the Iraqi nation partly persist, established terms or concepts were often redefined and acquired new meanings.

The US occupation's attempt to "de-Ba`thify" the Iraqi state and society was ineffective and resulted in heavy censorship of the recent Ba`thist past, rather than starting a process of reckoning and coming to terms with this legacy. Former adherents, participants, or supporters of the Ba`th Party faced potential legal persecution, leading many to reinvent themselves and express Ba`th Party perspectives on Iraq's recent history through code words, metaphors, historical analogies, and proxy ideologies (for instance, references to sufism; see David Jordan's essay in this roundtable section). Ba`thism was released of its tightly controlled uniformity, which used to be strictly regulated by the Revolutionary Command Council during Saddam Hussein's rule. As a result, contemporary expressions of the pre-2003 state-sponsored narratives about Iraqi national history are more heterogeneous than during the Ba`thist period.⁵

¹ Edward W. Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 176.

² Selma Leydesdorff, "When All Is Lost: Metanarrative in the Oral History of Hanifa, Survivor of Srebrenica," in *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*, ed. M. Cave and S. M. Sloan (New York: Oxford University Press), 17–22.

³ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 6–8.

⁴ Yousef K. Baker, "Global Capitalism and Iraq: The Making of a Neoliberal State," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 40, no. 2 (2014): 121–48.

⁵ Fanar Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening: The Reinvention of Sunni Identity, 2003–2014," in *Iraq Since the Invasion: People and Politics in a State of Conflict*, ed. Keiko Sakai and Philip Marfleet (London: Routledge, 2020), 46–71.

The Ba`thist era itself is a controversial topic for discussion in contemporary Iraq. Successive Iraqi governments ensured that school history textbooks scarcely mention the era of Ba`thist rule, it is neither praised nor condemned nor scrutinized, arguably a safe choice meant to please everyone involved, including the Americans. A similar picture emerges when looking at history curriculum in most Iraqi universities. According to Yamao Dai, the Ba`thist era was “deleted” but not “delegitimized” by the post-2003 order.⁶ The US occupation and its political, social, and economic policies prevented any authority from gaining sufficient legitimacy and institutional power in the public sphere to promote and regulate a basic consensus on recent Iraqi history. To be sure, extensive documentaries, interviews, op eds, reports, books, and articles on the Ba`th era are continuously published in traditional media and social media, representing a wide spectrum of opinions. But these developments occur outside the framework of the Iraqi state, reflecting a decentralization of Iraqi collective and cultural memory shaped by transnational funding, elites, and institutions.⁷ The lack of any official narrative about the Ba`thist period illustrates both the absence of a societal consensus concerning Iraq’s difficult legacy and the weakness of the Iraqi state in promoting or coordinating an official public memory.

Based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in Iraq, in this essay I show how opinions and ideas concerning the Iraqi state and nation and contemporary political struggles are articulated and framed through the memory of the 1991 uprising. In Western and Arab studies of the 1991 Gulf War, the uprising that erupted in the power vacuum after Iraq’s military defeat is only marginally discussed.⁸ But since 2003 the meaning of the 1991 uprising has become a source of intense political polarization.⁹ It has been a recurring topic during moments of sect-coded conflict in Iraq.¹⁰ However, its collective political meaning and extra-sectarian significance have not been sufficiently explored.

During my fieldwork in Diwaniya, Najaf, Karbala, and Hila from 2021 to 2022, the political climate in Iraq was tense and volatile. It was characterized by power struggles between competing factions in the run-up to the parliamentary elections and their aftermath. At the same time, the country was grappling with intensified antagonisms stemming from the 2019 Tishreen protests (see Balsam Mustafa’s essay in this roundtable section); the assassination of Qasim Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Quds forces and important power broker in Iraq, and his Iraqi ally and the Kata’ib Hezbollah commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in Baghdad at the hands of US forces in 2020; the COVID-19 pandemic; and the Iraqi government’s inability to address unemployment and rising food prices during the term of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi (May 2020–October 2022).

Haunting Memories: The 1991 Uprising in Contemporary Political Debates

In late July/August 2022, the Sadrist movement occupied the Iraqi parliament for several days as part of its power struggle with the Coordination Framework (hereafter CF; an umbrella group that represents the Da`wa Party, al-Hikma, and Fatah). At stake was the selection of the prime minister: whereas the Sadrists rooted for Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the CF

⁶ Dai Yamao, “Regime Change and National Integration Policy: Focusing on Iraqi School Textbooks Before and After the 2003 US Invasion,” in Sakai and Marfleet, *Iraq Since the Invasion*, 158.

⁷ Hamid `Abd Allah’s immensely popular YouTube channel *tlk al ayam* comes to mind, as well as several others, such as As`ad al-Basri’s regular political programs or Hamd al-Shakr’s YouTube channel on which he discusses various historical episodes.

⁸ See for example, Muhammad Haykal, *Harb al-Khalij: Awham al-Quwwa wa-l-Nasr* (Cairo: 1992); Majid Khadduri and Edmund Ghareeb, *War in the Gulf, 1990–91: The Iraq-Kuwait Conflict and Its Implications* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁹ See also Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 141.

¹⁰ Hadi Wahab, “Syria’s Sect-Coded Conflict: From Hezbollah’s Top-Down Instrumentalization of Sectarian Identity to Its Candid Geopolitical Confrontation,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 8, no. 2 (2021): 149–67.

supported Muhammad Shi'a al-Sudani. The memory of the 1991 uprising figured prominently in this struggle. Anonymous opponents of Muqtada al-Sadr circulated a photo of an article on Twitter, which was taken from the erstwhile leading daily newspaper *al-Thawra* (The Revolution) owned by the Ba'ath party, supposedly from March 1991 and containing statements by Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (the father of Muqtada al Sadr, today's political leader of the Sadrists) in which he called for obedience to the Ba'athist leadership and framed participants of the 1991 uprising negatively. The government assassinated Ayatollah al-Sadr in April 1999. The intended message of this tweet was that the Sadrist movement is and always was a Ba'athist movement in disguise, or at least a movement that does its bidding.¹¹ On August 10, 2022 an unverified statement of the Coordination Framework was released, which denounced the Sadrists as an anarchistic mob that could not simply impose their will as they pleased (referring to the storming of the Iraqi parliament by Sadrists). Notably, in this unverified statement the CF used the term *gawga'iyyin* (rabble rousers) to describe the Sadrists, a derogatory term that had been used by the Ba'athist regime to refer to the 1991 insurgents. In turn, the Sadrists pointed to the use of this term by the CF to claim that it was no different from the Ba'athists who brutally repressed the 1991 uprising.¹²

Implying a similarity between the US and the former Ba'athist regime, in 2020 the commemoration ceremony of the 1991 uprising was dedicated to Qasim Sulaymani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, both of whom had been assassinated by the US shortly before.¹³ During the Tishreen protests that erupted in October 2019 against the political elites and bad governance, footage of the violent suppression of the 1991 uprising circulated, implying that the current Iraqi government was no different from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.¹⁴ The Tishreen protests were sometimes framed by its supporters as a continuation of the 1991 uprising.¹⁵ At the same time, protestors also celebrated Saddam Hussein's war against Iran, indicating that the Tishreen movement was ideologically rife with contradictions.¹⁶ Iraqi intellectual Rashid Muhammad al-Hilawi argued that the creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces in 2014 (an umbrella organization of various armed groups recruited to assist the Iraqi government in its war against ISIS) illustrated the persistent spirit of the 1991 uprising.¹⁷ When ISIS killed 1700 young unarmed Iraqi cadets in 2014, this carnage, commonly known as the Speicher massacre, was instantly compared to the Ba'athist

¹¹ Sayf al-'Iraqi hasab al-Badil #Bassam_Khashab @_saif_313_, "Laysa muqtada. Awwal mu'asim min bayt al-Sadr man yuhi' al-madhab sibqa jada #Muhammad_Hasan_al-Sadr ba' tadhayat al-Shi'a fi thawrat al-'ishrin min ajl mansib ra'is al-wuzara' wa dhahab li-l-Sa'udiyya li munafiqat al-Malik Faysal wa kadhalak Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr khadhhal. Qadat al-intifada al-sha'baniyya 1991 min ajl ma tusami al-hawza al-'Arabiyya" Twitter, 15 August 2022, https://twitter.com/_saif_313_/status/1558994426541793280.

¹² "Al-Itar al-Tansiqi Yah'u li-l-Bida' bi-Inqisad Jilsat al-Barliman fi Makan Ba'idan 'an al-Fawdawiyyin wa-l-Ghawgha'iyyin," *News* (blog), 10 August 2022, <https://1news-iq.com/2022/08/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a5%d8%b7%d8%a7%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%b3%d9%8a%d9%82%d9%8a-%d9%8a%d8%af%d8%b9%d9%88-%d9%84%d9%84%d8%a8%d8%af%d8%a1-%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%b9%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%af-%d8%ac%d9%84>.

¹³ A complete recording of this commemorative event is available at: "Mahrajan al-Intifada al-Sha'baniyya al-Mubarakat 'ala Ruh Qadat al-Nasr al-Mughadarin Qasim Sulaymani wa Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis 2021," YouTube video, 19 January 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NdNMw8-0S0>.

¹⁴ Lucia Ardovali and Dylan O'Driscoll, "The Failure of the Social Contract in Iraq: Iraqi Perspectives," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 19 May 2023, doi: 10.1080/17502977.2023.2210732; Balsam Mustafa, "All About Iraq: Re-Modifying Older Slogans and Chants in Tishreen [October] Protests," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 3 (2023): 401–20.

¹⁵ Riham al-Hakim, "'Am 'ala Thawrat al-'Iraq .. Tishrin al-Sumud Ta'ud #nurid_watan (milaf khass)" 3 October 2020, <https://daarb.com/%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%87%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d9%83%d9%8a%d9%85-%d8%aa%d9%83%d8%aa%d8%a8-%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89-%d8%ab%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%82>.

¹⁶ Farah Zahra, "Ya Ka' Tarabij Kafur | al-Muqawama al-Ghina'iyya fi 'Iraq al-Ba'ath," *Ma'azif*, 14 November 2019, <https://ma3azef.com/>.

¹⁷ Salman Rashid al-Hilawi, "al-Intifada al-Sha'baniyya fi-l-'Iraq 'Am 1991 (Qadda' al-Nasr Anamudhja) (al-Qism al-Awwal)," <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=630645> (accessed 21 February 2023); "Adab Fatwa al-Difa'

repression in 1991 by both the Shi'i religious establishment and victims' families.¹⁸ To frame these repeated allusions to 1991 merely as a top-down memory construction in the interest of ruling elites would be oversimplifying. The 1991 insurrection has long been a crucial event in Iraqi collective memory. As early as spring 2003 burial ceremonies were held for the martyrs of 1991 all over Iraq, before any political parties could organize them.¹⁹ Even Saddam Hussein himself, shortly before his fall, was concerned by the possibility of a domestic revolt against him reminiscent of the 1991 uprising, rather than worrying about the looming US invasion.²⁰ The 1991 uprising was also a prominent theme in the former dictator's infamous novels.²¹

Looking at the 1991 uprising solely through a sectarian framing means perpetuating a misunderstanding that also hinders a full appreciation of its contemporary significance in the collective memory of Iraqis. Although back in 1991 Ayatollah Khamenei and Iranian President Rafsanjani had expressed their support for the insurgents, the 1991 uprising seems to have inspired little transnational Shi'a familiarity. Despite attempts to spread awareness of the uprising among Shi'i pilgrims visiting Iraq, such as attaching plaques at the entrance to the tomb of Imam Husayn in Karbala that mention the destruction of the shrines by the Republican Guards (Ba`thist special forces) during the regime's counterinsurgency campaign in 1991, the memory of the uprising is today contested only in the Iraqi context.²² Notably, Muhammad Shi'a al-Sudani, a participant in the 1991 uprising, became prime minister in October 2022. This unprecedented step possibly marks a turning point in the event's legacy.

The Myth of the Rival Political Battlefield

In post-ISIS Iraqi public discourse, the myth has been spread that Iraq's political, economic, and social conditions are the result of a rivalry between the United States and Iran. This narrative was also promoted by English-language media, policy analysis, and think tank reports.²³ It harks back to the proxy war paradigm of the Cold War era, which has been debunked many times, but nonetheless has enjoyed increased currency in scholarship on contemporary Iraq since the 2000s.²⁴

Iraq is viewed here as a mere "theater of war," and the destruction that Iraq experienced from 2003 to 2022 is attributed to Iran and the US playing out their rivalry. An Iraqi nationalist trope claims that the Iraqi nation-state should push back against foreign interference in its affairs, hinting mainly at the United States and Iran.²⁵ But Iraq's woes can hardly be attributed solely to foreign meddling or the US-Iran rivalry. Moreover, this belief relies on the idea of absolute sovereignty, that is, on the myth of Westphalian sovereignty that is overtheorized by US political science, although the United States is indeed

al-Muqaddisa: al-Khu'i wa-l-Sistani wa Shu'ban fi Tarikh al-'Iraq," <http://holkyatwa.com/news/read/704> (accessed 13 May 2023).

¹⁸ Tim Arango, "Escaping Death in Northern Iraq," *New York Times*, 4 September 2014.

¹⁹ Haddad, "Sectarian Awakening," 246.

²⁰ Kevin M. Woods and Mark E. Stout, "Saddam's Perceptions and Misperceptions: The Case of 'Desert Storm,'" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no.1 (2010): 5–41.

²¹ Hawraa al-Hassan, *Women, Writing and the Iraqi Ba'athist State: Contending Discourses of Resistance and Collaboration, 1968–2003* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), ch. 2.

²² Safa Haeri, "Rafsanjani Tells Saddam That It Is Time to Go," *The Independent*, 9 March 1991; "Crisis in the Gulf: Saddam's Men 'Kill 16,000 Rebels,'" *The Independent*, 19 March 1991.

²³ AFP, "Iraq Caught in the Middle of US-Iran Face-Off," *France 24*, 21 May 2019; Jarret Bencks, "2019 Protests in Iraq: A Primer," *BrandeisNOW*, 11 December 2019; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Stuck in the Middle: Iraq and the Enduring Conflict between United States and Iran," *Order from Chaos* (Brookings blog), 29 January 2020.

²⁴ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Middle East in the World Hierarchy: Imperialism and Resistance," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14, no. 2 (2011): 213–46.

²⁵ Maria-Louise Clausen, "The Potential of Nationalism in Iraq: Caught between Domestic Repression and External Co-Optation," *POMEPS Blog*, Elliott School of International Affairs, 26 March 2020.

among the few state actors that arguably comes close to achieving this kind of sovereignty.²⁶

Against this background, putting the US and Iran on the same level is inherently misleading, because their relationship to Iraq is fundamentally different.²⁷ Iran shares the largest border with Iraq, and both countries have long been closely entangled on multiple levels, including economic and political links and the exchange of ideas, regardless of any US–Iran rivalry. Iran is a developing country facing complex security dilemmas in Iraq, which are intensified by US sanctions and military bases in Iraq and beyond.²⁸ In contrast, the United States’ structural and institutional impact on Iraq stems from its position as a global hegemonic power and is driven by the need to sustain this position socially, politically, and culturally.²⁹

Common assumptions (both in Iraq and abroad) about Iranian influence in Iraq overestimate the significance of sectarianism in shaping the behavior of Shi’i politicians who are assumed to have personal ties with Iranian elites and frame their policy decisions accordingly. However, there is a lack of evidence to support this assumption, which reflects a long-standing Arab nationalist trope about Shi’a Muslims.³⁰ When Iraqi politicians like Hadi al-`Amiri (head of the Badr brigades, an Iraqi armed group with political representation in the Iraqi government) support the Iranian doctrine of *vilāyat-e faqīh* (rule of the jurist) or acknowledge the status of Ayatollah Khamenei as *marja`-e taqlīd* (senior scholar to follow), it is often taken as evidence for their “loyalty” toward Iran. But the actual meaning of this loyalty is rarely explained. For example, “pro-Iranian” armed groups in Iraq such as the Ashab al-Kahf have operated along a decidedly Iraqi agenda that does not automatically suit Iranian foreign policy goals.³¹ Furthermore, the “pro-Iranian” prime minister ‘Adil ‘Abd al-Mahdi turned out to be sensitive to the threat of US sanctions against Iraq and gave up his position to Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who was favored by the United States. In turn, since his loss in the elections and the end of his tenure as prime minister, Kadhimi seems to be interested in improving his relations with the Iranian government.³²

Finally, the narrative of US–Iran rivalry as a decisive factor in post-2003 Iraq diverts attention from the fact that the forceful opening of Iraq to neoliberal globalization in 2003 meant a large influx of capital, lobby groups, and military assets from a variety of countries including the EU, the Gulf emirates, and East Asian countries. Iraq’s problem is a problem of the Global South: all of these countries have to contend with the reality of a global economic system that remains rooted in neoliberal thinking, with domestic neoliberal elites and their middlemen, their disciplinary instruments, and their ideological capacities, and these factors have an impact that transcends specific rivalries between imagined sovereign nation-states.³³

²⁶ Andreas Osiander, “Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth,” *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (2001): 251–87.

²⁷ Kayhan Barzegar, “Iran’s Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam,” *Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2010): 173–89.

²⁸ Hamidreza Azizi, “Challenges to Iran’s Role in Iraq in the Post-Soleimani Era: Complex Rivalries, Fragmented Alliances, Declining Soft Power,” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, 22 July 2021, doi: 10.18449/2021C44; Stephen M. Walt, “Does Anyone Still Understand the ‘Security Dilemma?’” *Foreign Policy*, 26 July 2022.

²⁹ Dave Whyte, “The Crimes of Neo-Liberal Rule in Occupied Iraq,” *British Journal of Criminology* 47, no. 2 (2007): 177–95; David Vine, *Base Nation: How US Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015), 5–12.

³⁰ Khalil Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq: The Making of State and Nation since 1920* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 220–29.

³¹ Evan Kohlmann, “Profile and Exclusive Interview with Iraqi Shiite Insurgents Ashab al-Kahf,” *Flashpoint* (website), 20 August 2020, <https://flashpoint.io/blog/profile-and-exclusive-interview-with-iraqi-shiite-insurgents-ashab-al-kahf/>; “Fasil ‘Ashab al-Kahf’ Yadakk al-Sifara al-Amrikiyya fi-l-‘Iraq bi-Sawarikh Jadida,” *Mehr News Agency*, 18 November 2020, <https://ar.mehrnews.com/news/1909485>.

³² Martin Chulov, “Iraq Scales Down Threats to Expel US Forces after Trump Reaction,” *The Guardian*, 6 January 2020; “Amir-Abdollahian Meets with Former Iraqi PM al-Kadhimi,” *Mehr News Agency*, 21 February 2023.

³³ Hinnebusch, “Middle East,” 3–5.

Nationalism and Sovereignty and the Memory of the 1991 Uprising

My fieldwork demonstrates how Iraqis reflect upon, add nuance, emphasize, or critique powerful discourses on sovereignty and the nation–state through the ways in which they narrate Iraq’s recent past and specifically the 1991 uprising. One of my interviewees was a lawyer who had previously been a candidate in the municipal elections in the governorate of Diwaniya. He also represented victims of the Ba`thist government who filed pleas for compensation. He explained to me that during the 1991 uprising,

There was no real organization and no support from neighboring countries such as Iran. The USA did nothing to support Iraq. They both agreed [Iran and the US] that Saddam would stay. Moreover, they both agreed that they need internal allies inside Iraq before Saddam can be deposed. So, they created new politicians to take over Iraq once Saddam would be gone. They got rid of a true domestic opposition composed of persons who stayed in Iraq and know what Iraq is about. Today the politicians and the people are distant from each other.

The 1991 resistance movement is presented here as victim of a joint Iran–US conspiracy; both rivaling powers are portrayed as scheming and exploiting the vulnerability of Iraqis by keeping a weakened Saddam Hussein in power as long as he served their purposes. The passage suggests that the uprising failed because of a lack of external support. Further emphasizing Iraq’s loss of sovereignty, this interviewee portrays the Gulf War of 1991 not as a confrontation between Iraq and the United States, but rather like a game of chess between Iran and the United States: “Iran supported Iraq (up to 1991). They did that to empower Iraq so that Iraq would confront the United States so that the United States would weaken Iraq.” Linking the 1991 uprising to the 2019 Tishreen protests in an overarching genealogy of struggles for Iraqi national liberation, this interviewee stated:

Did the intifada end in 1991? No, it continued . . . Tishreen is the continuation of the 1991 uprising. Iraq gives birth to revolutionaries and revolutions. The 1920 revolution against the British was continued by the intifada, and Tishreen followed the intifada. These were uprisings against governments that don’t care about the people. The Iraqi people are civilized and democratic, as can be derived from the fact that five elections have taken place in Iraq despite the distrust Iraqis have in the politicians. The same as in 1991, both the USA and Iran fear this.

In this context, popular uprisings and revolutions are defined as struggles to remove the influence of foreign powers and to regain Iraqi sovereignty. Additionally, both the US and Iran are presented as opposing democracy, unlike Iraqis. The views expressed by this interviewee may reflect his personal belief in democracy, as evidenced by his previous candidacy in municipal elections.³⁴

Similarly, when asked if Iraq should have been defended during the Iran–Iraq War, a second interviewee answered: “Yes, we always felt this is a holy duty. However, if your government treats you in a hostile way . . . , this feeling is repressed.” For this interviewee, the domestic policies of Saddam Hussein’s regime diminished the nationalist value of fighting in the Iran–Iraq War. In contrast, he characterized the 1991 uprising as a truly national movement: “I believed in the uprising, because *the people* viewed it as a way to end the rule of tyrants.”³⁵ Many of my interviewees rejected the nationalist meaning Ba`thists ascribed to the Iran–Iraq War, but emphasized the patriotism of the 1991 uprising. Many (neo)-Ba`thists argue the oppo-

³⁴ Interview with lawyer, Diwaniya, December 2021.

³⁵ Written correspondence with participant of 1991 uprising, November 2021.

site way.³⁶ Many of my interviewees were highly critical of the post-2003 political order and harbored anti-American feelings, but still rejected comparisons of the current Iraqi government with the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. Here, my interviewees demonstrated a sensitivity to historical context in their discussions of Iraqi nationalism.³⁷

One interviewee, a teacher who participated in the 1991 uprising in Diwaniya, elaborated on the historical meanings of the Iran–Iraq War and linked it to the question of sovereignty. He argued that Iraq succeeded when it had strong ties with Iran and claimed that groups such as ISIS emerged because Iran was unable to defeat Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq War:

You know if we did not enter the war with Iran [in 1980], Iraq would have been better than Malaysia and those countries. Iraq was the top of the world. . . . If Khomeini continued the war [at the time], there would have been no ISIS today. I am convinced of this. . . . It would be a loss to all the countries that brought Saddam to Iraq. They won't repeat it again. . . . When Saddam left, they brought a replacement for him, they brought al-Qaeda and ISIS. Each country Iran puts its hand in, wins. In Gaza, Arafat did not put his hand with Iran, and he is nowhere now, him and his people, trampled upon and gone. It's a war of principles.

In this statement, Saddam Hussein is portrayed as a foreign implant who led Iraq into doom by attacking Iran. Iraqi sovereignty is defined as freedom from the dictator and the former government's supposed Salafi-Wahhabi-inspired militant mutations, which are equally presented as foreign implants, implicitly hinting at the US. Notably, Iranian influence in Iraq is not perceived negatively, but as a support for achieving prosperity and independence. In fact, the relationship between Iran and the United States is seen here as a war of principles transcending the nation–state. National sovereignty in the established meaning of the term is subordinated here to the absolute sovereignty of principles, which is different from a rivalry between Iran and the United States in a *realpolitik* sense, and which also implies a different understanding of what national sovereignty means.³⁸

A further interviewee and veteran of the 1991 uprising, a car mechanic from the town of al-Hamza, located in the governorate of al-Qadisiyya south of Baghdad, defined national sovereignty as a supreme value that trumps domestic political disagreements: “Domestically, we were not with Saddam, but when it comes to foreign policy I am.” The interviewee referred here to the occupation of Kuwait and signaled agreement with an Iraqi nationalist trope that also was used by Saddam Hussein to legitimize the invasion of the emirate, that is, irredentist claims regarding Kuwait according to which it had refused to stop selling Iraq's oil and had thereby pushed Iraq into defending its legitimate interests at a moment of severe economic crisis.³⁹ He clearly disapproved of the death and destruction wrought on Iraq as a result of the war, but remained ambiguous concerning the question of responsibility: “We all put that on the head of Saddam instead of the United States. We all started saying, if only he [Saddam] did not enter Kuwait. . . . but is there anyone who can say something against America?” This interviewee's hesitance in putting all blame for the events of 1991 on Saddam Hussein, against whom he had fought during the uprising, might reflect his perspective thirty years after the events, which in hindsight proved to be only one episode in a chain of destruction and wars, in which the US played a decisive role.

³⁶ Dina Rizk Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 246–53.

³⁷ Omnia El Shakry, “Rethinking Arab Intellectual History: Epistemology, Historicism, Secularism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 2 (2021): 547–72.

³⁸ Interview with a teacher, Diwaniya, December 2021.

³⁹ F. Gregory Gause III, “Iraq's Decision to Go to War, 1980 and 1990,” *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 1 (2002): 47–70.

Conclusion

As elsewhere in the world, notions of nationalism and sovereignty remain highly influential in the post-2003 Iraqi political landscape. These ideas are articulated and negotiated through historical memories, which are essential tools for political mobilization in contemporary Iraq. Due to the absence of institutional frameworks capable of facilitating investigations of recent historical events such as the Iran–Iraq War and the 1991 uprisings that would be credible and acceptable to all parts of the Iraqi population, collective memory in Iraq remains fragmented. Crucial basic facts have yet to be established. For instance, the limited finances and unstable security environment in Iraq still slow down forensic efforts to map all mass graves and identify the remains.

In contemporary Iraq, debates about the Iraqi nation, sovereignty, and other matters of policy are often framed through the memory of the 1991 uprising. This sect-coded conflict was an expression of collective political will that is remembered in contemporary Iraq as part of a national struggle for sovereignty and freedom, at least among my interviewees in the southern part of Iraq, where support for the uprising was strong. More research is needed to determine whether the memory of 1991 has gained similar significance for contemporary debates in the western provinces of Iraq, and to what degree interpretations of these events vary or overlap with those discussed in this essay. Linking the memory of resistance against the Ba`thist regime with contemporary struggles is a phenomenon that has also been observed in the Kurdistan region.⁴⁰ It remains to be seen whether a bridging narrative regarding Iraq's recent past will eventually evolve out of various strands of collective memory.

⁴⁰ Mathijs Peters and Bareez Majid, *Exploring Hartmut Rosa's Concept of Resonance* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 111–40.