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Access Details: [subscription number 789278848]
Publisher: Routledge
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Survival Global Politics and Strategy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713659919>

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Online Publication Date: 01 April 2008

To cite this Article: Visser, Reidar (2008) 'Historical Myths of a Divided Iraq',
Survival, 50:2, 95 - 106

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/00396330802034317

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396330802034317>

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Historical Myths of a Divided Iraq

Reidar Visser

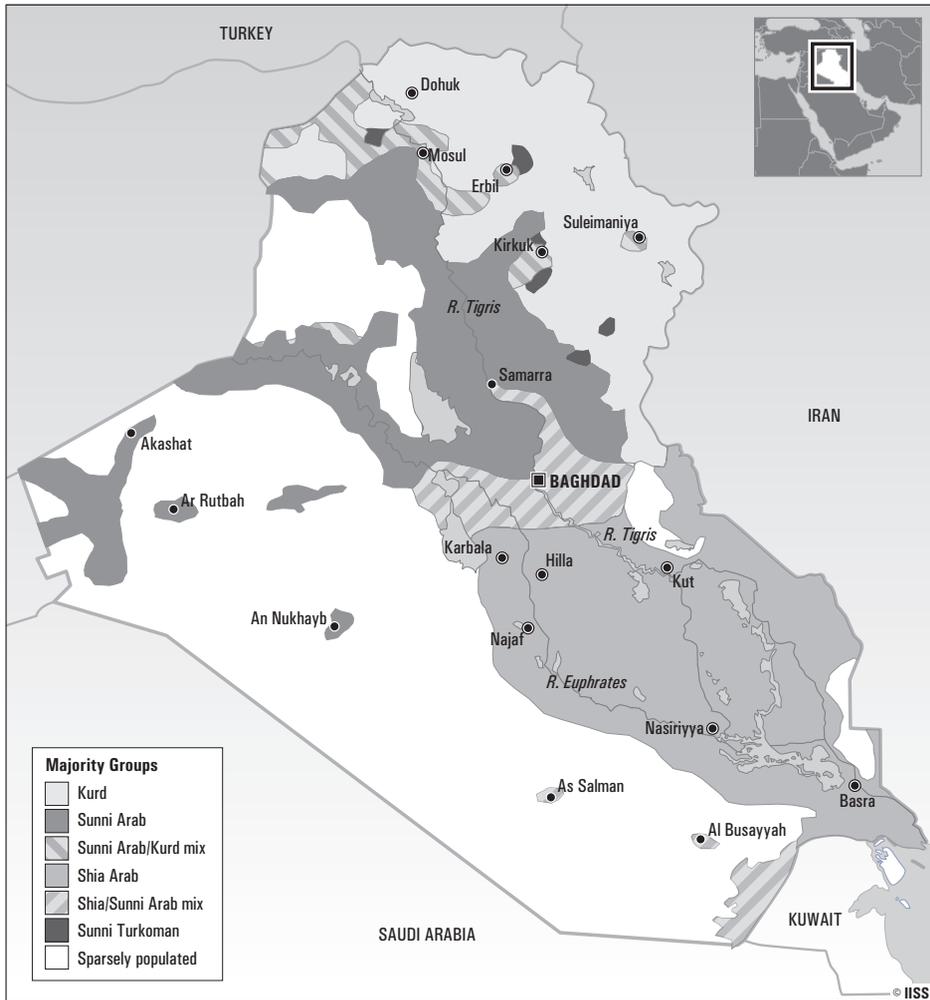
Calls in US circles for a 'soft partition' of Iraq along ethno-sectarian lines raise myriad ethical and practical questions, but there is a more fundamental historical problem.¹ One of the key arguments of those advocating partition is that Iraq is an 'artificial creation', but there is little evidence that the sectarian entities being considered are any less artificial, or that Iraqis themselves have ever advocated 'Shiistans' and 'Sunnistans'.

History (or what is seen as history) plays a formidable role in the competition of ideas in US policymaking circles. In a recent interview, Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations and a key proponent of soft partition, said the British

considered running the country more or less how the Ottomans had, with a strong central government but with the country divided, in effect, into three provinces: Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni, each having a different governor.²

None of these contentions are historically correct. If such errors were eliminated from the partitionist argument, the debate on the question of dividing Iraq would change. Analysts would look with fresh eyes at events in Iraq since the February 2006 Samarra bombing, and would be better able to distinguish between genuine historical trends and violent, but short-lived, episodic outbursts.

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Map 1. Modern distribution of ethno-religious groups and major tribes

A dearth of sectarian patterns

Gelb's version of Iraqi history is easily refuted. All that is required is a brief look at the map. His error is to misplace the administrative boundary between Basra and Baghdad. The boundary, in fact, was in the far south of the country, so that, of the Shia areas, only the modern-day towns of Basra, Amara and Nasiriyya were in the old Basra *vilayet*.³ Accordingly, the individual Iraqi *vilayets* had no particular sectarian colouring. If anything, there were more Shi'ites in Baghdad than in Basra, whereas Mosul was essentially a mixed province of Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens, Yazidis, Christians and

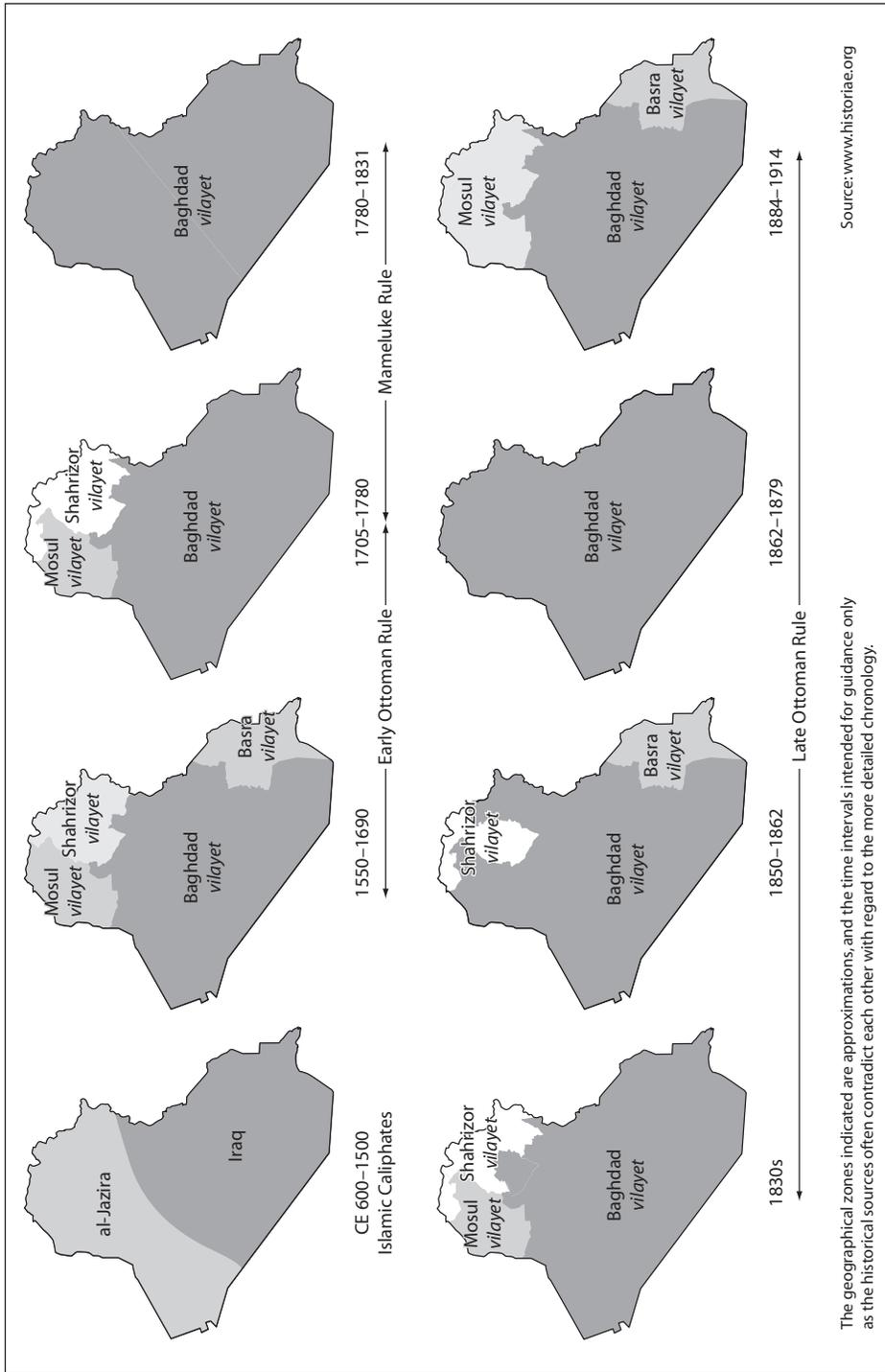
others. Politically, all three provinces were Sunni dominated. When, during the First World War, the British briefly contemplated a separation between the *vilayets* of Basra and Baghdad, this had everything to do with the strategic importance of Basra as the gateway to India, and nothing to do with sectarian calculations. At no point during the period of formal and later informal British control in Iraq between 1914 and 1958 did a British scheme to subdivide Iraq on the basis of sectarian identities materialise.⁴

Many historians recognise this much, but overlook the role of Baghdad as a proto-capital in late Ottoman Iraq. Basra, Baghdad and Mosul were not on an equal footing; in many matters (including military affairs, justice and customs administration) Baghdad ranked above the others. In 1908 a Baghdad-based Ottoman bureaucrat was appointed as 'reformer of Iraq', specifically charged with the affairs of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. After the First World War, in 1918, Arnold Wilson, the highest-ranking British official in Iraq, explicitly referred to this precedent as an argument for maintaining centralised rule from Baghdad over all three *vilayets*.⁵

But a more fundamental problem with any tripartite division of Iraq is that it is ahistorical. There may have been three *vilayets* in 1914, but they had existed for only 30 years. Prior to 1884, the administrative systems of Iraq had been varied. Sometimes there was greater fragmentation, perhaps four of five entities; sometimes there was territorial unity corresponding roughly to the modern state of Iraq.

One of the most frequent divisions was twofold, evident since ancient Mesopotamia. Although Mesopotamian unity was significant in classical times, in many periods there was bipolar north–south tension, between Sumer and Akkad, or Chaldeans and Assyrians. Many historians believe that the remnants of these tensions could be seen in late Sassanian times (the early seventh century CE, shortly before the Islamic conquest). At that time the territory of modern Iraq was divided into two, and this system continued during the first centuries of Muslim rule. There was Iraq itself, extending from Abadan in the south to the northern cities of Anbar and Tikrit; north of this lay al-Jazira, the island between the rivers, extending from Mosul and westwards. Despite the many upheavals of medieval times, this basic pattern survived through the Mongol and Turkmen periods, up

Map 2. Political/administrative divisions of Iraq, CE 600–1914



to the fifteenth century. There were variations: Arbil was sometimes in Iraq, sometimes in al-Jazira, and sometimes outside the reach of the central authorities altogether.⁶ Medieval frontiers between competing zones of interest should not be interpreted as fixed lines on a map. But the division into two large entities – the alluvial plain of Iraq and the hilly country of al-Jazira in the west – remained fairly consistent throughout eight centuries of early Islamic rule.

The Ottomans – to whom many modern commentators attribute the idea of a tripartite division – actually divided Iraq into four in the sixteenth century. They temporarily separated Basra from Baghdad, and divided al-Jazira into several parts so that the northern territories of modern-day Iraq were made up of the two *vilayets* of Mosul and Shahrizor (modern Kirkuk). But by the early eighteenth century, Basra and Baghdad had once more been amalgamated. Towards the end of the century the Georgian Mamelukes of Baghdad gradually wrested considerable autonomy from Istanbul, beginning the building of a regional state structure based on Baghdad that corresponded quite closely with twentieth-century Iraq. Basra and Baghdad remained unified, Shahrizor was subdued and incorporated, and Mosul, though technically independent and dominated by a local Arab dynasty, now tended to look to Baghdad rather than to Istanbul.⁷

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In 1831, the Ottomans brought local Mameluke rule to an end, but the idea of a larger regional entity based on Baghdad, with sub-centres in Basra and Kirkuk, lived on. In 1850 Mosul was added to the Iraqi core, while for 12 years Basra was separated from it. Then, from 1862, the *vilayet* of Baghdad was again a state structure of a single Iraqi entity corresponding almost exactly to the modern state.⁸ This arrangement lasted more or less until the 1880s, when Mosul and Basra were separated, and for 30 years – and for the first time in its history – Iraq assumed the tripartite structure that has become entrenched in Western historiography as the basic administrative pattern of 400 years of Ottoman rule.

For most of the time between its foundation in 762 and the Ottoman conquest in 1534, Baghdad was the undisputed capital of Iraq. From the late seventeenth century onwards it regained that role, to the point where the political geography of Iraq in the 1860s and 1870s was virtually indistinguishable from that supposedly created artificially by the British in 1920. Such was the endurance of Baghdad's central role that during a *darbar* arranged by the British occupation authorities in 1918 (when the 1914 administrative divisions were still in place), some of the biggest tribes of the Basra *vilayet* chose to participate in Baghdad.⁹

The various subunits that emerged in Iraqi administrative history were consistently non-sectarian and non-ethnic in character. Medieval Iraq and al-Jazira were mixed provinces – Shi'ite and Sunni, Jewish and Christian, Arab, Kurd and Turkmen. The same can be said of the entities created during Ottoman times. The holy cities of the Shi'ites were always in Baghdad's jurisdiction and had no administrative connection with Basra, whereas in the north, both Mosul and Shahrizor remained ethnically complex. At no point during the 1,300 years of Islamic rule is it possible to speak of purely Shia or Sunni administrative entities.

Non-sectarian challenges

If the administrative system itself was not ethnically inspired, the possibility of ethnic and sectarian challenges to it remained. Developments in Basra in the seventeenth century are a good example. Shortly after 1610 there emerged in Basra a local dynasty, the Afrasiyabs, who for 60 years were virtually independent of Istanbul. European travellers were voluble about the good governance of Basra in this period: 'There is so much liberty and so much good order in the city that you may walk all night long in the streets without molestation', claimed one visitor in the 1630s.¹⁰ Commerce with the Portuguese, Dutch and British was blossoming, and the Basra government prospered due to tax revenues from the land between Qurna and Fao, which was 'covered by dates'. The Afrasiyabs were popular with their subjects, some of whom wrote poetry to celebrate the princes of Basra. This emirate corresponded roughly to the Basra *vilayet* of the nineteenth century, with only the Shatt al-Arab under firm government control, and with the

marshlands north of Qurna serving as a buffer against Baghdad rather than as core territory of the emirate.

Sandwiched between the competing Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shia Safavid Empire, the Afrasiyabs never framed their autonomy in sectarian terms, but rather opted for a cosmopolitan formula. While the ruler maintained a formally correct Sunni facade, many Shi'ites rose to important positions and both Christian and Mandaean communities thrived. It was quite typical of the spirit of the Afrasiyab emirate that Arabs and Mandaeans joined together in 1625 to defend the city against an external threat, an invasion from Persia.¹¹ Western researchers have taken great pains trying to pin down the precise ethnic and sectarian origin of the ruling family, but the Afrasiyab dynasty defies this sort of classification.

The non-sectarian character of the Afrasiyab emirate is typical of the challenges mounted in Iraq against the imperial government. Basra saw further revolts in the 1690s and 1780s, directed by Sunni tribal leaders against the Sunni central government. Similarly, shortly after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, Basra mounted a separatist movement to establish itself as a Gulf state, but sectarian identity was again not involved. The Basra separatist movement was headed by a coalition of Sunnis from Najd, Christians, Jews and a few wealthy Persians, with the Shia Arab majority of Basra remaining largely on the sidelines.¹²

In northern Iraq, a similar pattern prevailed. Mosul's bid for relative autonomy was headed by a Sunni Arab dynasty and was not a sectarian challenge to the existing order. It has been described as an attempt at defining a reformist and a regionalist position within the overall framework of the Ottoman system.¹³ Similarly, whilst the Kurdish areas saw several autonomy initiatives in the form of local emirates during the centuries of Islamic rule, intra-Kurdish conflict between competing emirates was the dominant trend. It is not accidental that these local autonomy projects, headed by the Jalilis of Mosul, the Babans of Sulaymaniyya and the Soran of Rawanduz, are known by their dynastic names. To read modern nationalism, whether Arab or Kurdish, into these local struggles would be teleological in the extreme.

Sectarian challenges

Sectarian challenges did emerge occasionally before 1914, but they were the exception to the rule. One materialised in and around Hilla in central Iraq in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries.¹⁴ The Mazyadid emirate, headed by an Arab dynasty of the Bani Asad tribe, is the closest thing to a historical Shia state south of Baghdad. Even though it was not formally a Shia entity, the Shia identity of the Mazyadid rulers was reflected from time to time in political events. Since the 930s, Iraq had seen occasional flare-ups of sectarian Shia–Sunni conflict, and in this context the Shia Mazyadid emirate was in some ways a challenge to the caliphate. In 1051, for example, some Shia graves in Baghdad were burnt. The emir responded by deciding not to read the *khutba*, or sermon, in the name of the caliph, in protest that the caliph had been unable to protect Shi'ites. This ruler, Dubays, was later involved in the Basasiri revolt, probably an attempt to expand the power of the Cairo-based Shia Fatimid dynasty into Iraq and to get rid of the Turkish Seljuk rulers of Baghdad altogether.¹⁵ Hilla also became an intellectual centre of Shiism in the twelfth century.¹⁶

But even this case is limited as a historical precedent for a Shia state. The Mazyadids were based in Hilla, but their sphere of influence was not exclusively to the south; they proved equally interested in expansion towards Anbar and Tikrit. The Mazyadids saw Basra primarily as a tax farm, and

they held it only briefly. After they had lost their grip on the city, they plundered it on more than one occasion. Moreover, a Shia political ideology underpinning the idea of a separate Shia state was lacking. Most of the time the Mazyadids remained technically loyal to the government in Baghdad, and even when they revolted they did not offer

a specific Shia political theory to provide legitimacy to a breakaway state. Finally, the Mazyadids' alliances suggest they were not so different from other Iraqi challengers to the imperial government. In the 1120s Dubays II was in exile in Syria; in a desperate search for allies who could help him return to Iraq, he cooperated with Sunni Turks and Crusaders alike. His attempt to occupy Aleppo failed, partly because the Shi'ites of Aleppo

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refused to support the foreign invaders. On top of this, the Bani Asad were driven out of central Iraq, partly by competing Shia tribes. Today members of Bani Asad live in the far south of Iraq, at Mudayna near the marshes.¹⁷

Few comparable examples in Iraqi history of sectarian challenges against the existing order can be found. There were other Shia-inspired revolts (the Zanj revolt of Basra in the ninth century; the Musha'shas of the marshes north of Basra in medieval times), but these were extremely short lived, and in many cases headed by leaders considered heretics by modern-day Shi'ites. Perhaps the best example of enduring resistance against Ottoman rule framed to some extent in communitarian terms may be that of the Yazidis around Mosul, who posed a problem for the Ottomans as early as the seventeenth century.¹⁸

* * *

The geographical concept of 'Iraq' is enduring. In 1908, the British geographer and diplomat J.G. Lorimer spoke of Baghdad as 'the commercial capital of Iraq'.¹⁹ In 1906, an Ottoman administrator would casually refer to 'the *vilayets* of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul which make up the region of Iraq'.²⁰ In the 1890s, a Basra historian recalled how 'Iran' had attacked 'Iraq' in the 1770s.²¹ In fact, the expression 'the region of Iraq' (*iklim-i irak*) can be found in early eighteenth-century Ottoman works such as *Gulshan-i khulafa* from 1730, suggesting that the concept of a late-medieval rupture to the territorial concept of Iraq is misleading.²²

Moreover, conflict over territory in Iraq has almost always been non-sectarian. With the exception of Kurdistan, which developed a nationalist movement in the twentieth century, the other sectarian entities being floated as a way forward for Iraq – Shiistan and Sunnistan – have no historical precedent. A political solution based on such sectarian entities might well lead to chronic political instability: it would not resonate with Iraqi history at all, and would be the most artificial of the many political models that have been proposed for Iraq since 2003. IISS Consulting Senior Fellow Toby Dodge has described tripartite partition proposals as 'sociologically and politically illiterate' in their assumptions;²³ it is now clear that they are also *historically* illiterate.

Notes

- 1 For a summary of the more practical problems related to the soft partition plans for Iraq, see Anthony H. Cordesman, 'Three Iraqs Would Be One Big Problem', *New York Times*, 9 May 2006, and Reidar Visser, 'Another Bout of Partitionism', 19 August 2007, www.historiae.org/partition.asp.
- 2 Bernard Gwerzman, 'Gelb: Federalism is Most Promising Way to End Civil War in Iraq', interview with Leslie H. Gelb, 16 October 2007, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/14531/gelb.html>.
- 3 *Vilayets* were the provinces of the Ottoman Empire. For the administrative arrangements of the late Ottoman era, see *Basra vilayeti salnamesi* [Yearbook of the Basra provincial authority], 1308/1890.
- 4 Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2005), pp. 62–3.
- 5 Wilson to India Office, 16 October 1918, UK National Archives, CAB 27/35.
- 6 An interesting source on late medieval Iraq is Muhammad Rashid al-Feel, *The Historical Geography of Iraq between the Mongolian and Ottoman Conquests, 1258–1534* (Baghdad: Electrofest Press, 1967). See also Alastair Northedge, 'Al-Iraq al-Arabi: Iraq's Greatest Region in the Pre-Modern Period', in Reidar Visser and Gareth Stansfield (eds), *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* (London: Hurst, 2007).
- 7 This period of Iraqi history is covered in Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1925) and Tom Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq: Mamluk Pashas, Tribal Shaykhs and Local Rule between 1802 and 1831* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982). For Mosul, see Dina Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); for Basra, see Thabit A.J. Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks, and Murder: The Political Economy of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Basra* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).
- 8 For these administrative changes, see Longrigg, *Four Centuries*, p. 280 and Andreas Birken, *Die Provinzen des Osmanischen Reiches* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 1976).
- 9 Fortnightly Report no. 20 by Civil Commissioner to Secretary of State for India, 11 October 1918, India Office Records, British Library, L/P&S 10/732.
- 10 Quoted in Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *The Six Voyages of John Baptista Tavernier* (London, 1678), p. 88. For a recent study of the Afrasiyab period, see Willem Floor, *The Persian Gulf: A Political and Economic History of Five Port Cities, 1500–1730* (Washington DC: Mage, 2006).
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 549. See also Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State*, pp. 107–108.
- 12 This movement is covered in Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State*. Amusingly, despite its emphatically non-sectarian character, the case of the Basra separatist movement is used by Peter Galbraith as an argument for a Shia federal entity: 'anecdotal evidence suggests that Iraq's Shiite masses may be more strongly in

- favour of self-government and more “Shiite nationalistic” than their leaders, except for SCIRI. In the 1920s, many Basra residents wanted their own state (akin to Kuwait), and there has been a revival of Basra separatism since 2003’. Peter Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 219.
- ¹³ Khoury, *State and Provincial Society*.
- ¹⁴ For this principality, see Abd al-Jabbar Naji, *Al-imara al-mazyadiyya: dirasa fi wad’iha al-siyasi wa-al-iqtisadi wa-al-ijtima’i*, 387–558 h. (Basra, 1970).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 85–7.
- ¹⁶ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 87–9.
- ¹⁷ For an anthropological account, see S.M. Salim, *Marsh Dwellers of the Euphrates Delta* (London: The Athlone Press, 1962).
- ¹⁸ For the Yazidis, see Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).
- ¹⁹ J.G. Lorimer, *Geographical and Statistical Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, 1908, p. 807.
- ²⁰ In the Ottoman Turkish original, ‘*Hitta-i Irak teskil eden Bagdad ve Basra ve Musul vilayetler*’. Ottoman archives, BOA, *Îrâde Dâhiliye*, 12/ L. 1324, note by Umûm Erkân-ı Harbiyye Dâ’iresi (Üçüncü Şu’besi) dated 28 November 1906.
- ²¹ *Basra vilayeti salnamesi*, 1308/1890, p. 164. This anonymous account is widely attributed to the Basra historian Abdallah Basha’yan; see for instance Longrigg, *Four Centuries*, pp. 329–30.
- ²² The author of this work is Murtaza Nazmizade. It covers the period up until 1718 and was probably completed around that time.
- ²³ Toby Dodge, ‘Seven Questions: Is the Surge Working in Iraq?’, *Foreign Policy* web exclusive, September 2007, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3982&print=1.

