



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

Year 5, Issue 14, October 2021

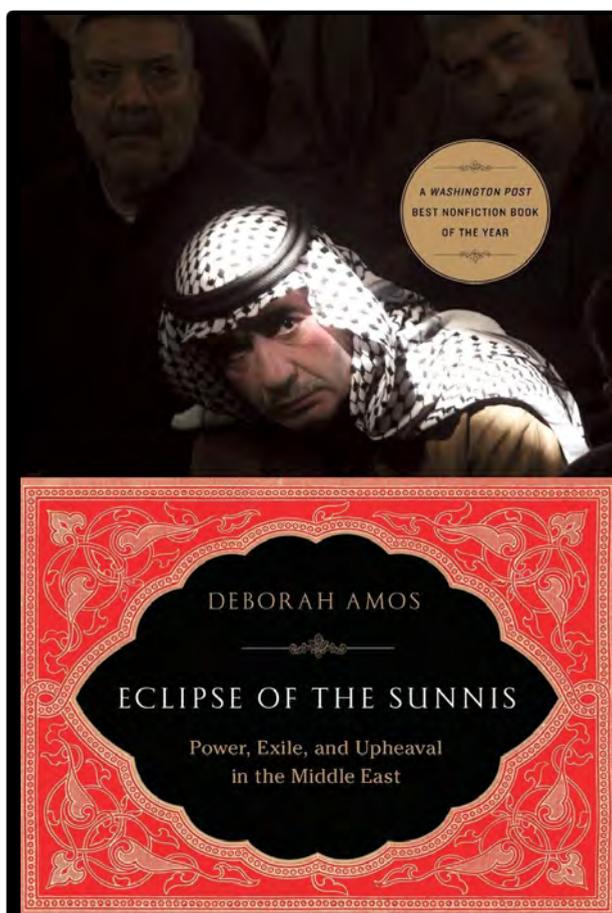
ISSUED BY



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

BOOK REVIEW
**ECLIPSE OF THE SUNNIS:
POWER, EXILE AND UPHEAVAL IN
THE MIDDLE EAST**

Book by: Deborah Amos
Review by Dr. Mohammed al-Sayyad,
the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)



The 2003 US invasion of Iraq profoundly and fundamentally transformed the country. As a result of this major shift, the structure of Iraqi society was transformed at various levels: political, sectarian and economic. The fall of Saddam Hussein's government contributed to the creation of a security and political vacuum, marking the end of Sunni dominance. On the other hand, anti-Baathist forces and Iran-backed Shiite groups took the limelight. However, the downfall of the Sunnis was not limited solely to politics, they had been targeted by Shiite militias since the 1980s, with them having expertise in guerilla warfare and trained in the use of weapons. This hostility against the Sunnis increased after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. This was coupled with the emergence of new Shiite militias with new names and leaders. They were all extremely loyal to the Iranian Guardian Jurist.

Deborah Amos documents in her book *Eclipse of the Sunnis: Power, Exile and Upheaval in the Middle East* the demographic and political marginalization of the Sunni community between 2003 and 2010. Her book is of great significance not only due to its pioneering contribution to the academic field but also because it chronicles her journey across the region, documenting the investigative research that she carried out. Her accounts are based on extensive fieldwork carried out in Iraq, Syria and others regional countries.

1. Mass Population Displacement

More than 2 million Sunnis were displaced from Iraq between 2003 to 2006. In Diyala Province, for example, Shiite militias worked to systematically transform the demographic map of the province. They carried out arrest campaigns, destroyed mosques/land, and assassinated people based on sect affiliation. This sectarian oppression turned systematic, with bomb attacks targeting two Sunni shrines in 2006, leading to widespread sectarian strife and internal fighting. Sectarian violence and forced displacement increased after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was expelled from Diyala in 2014. The Shiite militias comprehensively changed the demographics of the province. Similar devastation took place in all Sunni-majority cities under the pretext of fighting terrorism. This happened in Mosul, Salah al-Din and Ramadi. The cities adjacent to the Iranian border and the Baghdad Belts (the residential, agricultural and industrial areas that encircle the Iraq capital Baghdad) witnessed the greatest level of forced displacement.

Neighboring Iran took full advantage of the situation in Iraq. The Iranian government introduced a policy of indirect displacement against the Iraqi population. This included first, the deprivation of water resources as Tehran built dams on the headwaters of the Diyala River which decreased the water level and contributed to polluting the river, forcing many residents to leave their farms and homes.

Second, several Iranian cultural offices were established in Iraq. During former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's tenure, Iran opened three cultural offices in Diyala Province alone, more than the number of its offices in Najaf, Basra and Karbala. In these cities, there is just one Iranian cultural office. Third, Nouri al-Maliki distributed lands from Sunni provinces, particularly from Diyala Province, to Shiites belonging to southern Iraq who are known to have a doctrinal loyalty to the Iranian political system.

The strange issue observed by the author is that the number of Iraqis who were forced to leave Iraq during the three decades of Saddam Hussein's rule amounted to 5 million, but the same number was displaced in less than five years after the fall of Saddam's government. Those forced to leave were from Iraq's elite including doctors, scientists, poets, managers, and professionals. These people were the best hope for realizing America's ambition of turning Iraq into a bastion of democracy and prosperity.

Amos states that one-sixth of Iraqis have become refugees or displaced persons. Therefore, this huge number has dramatically altered the Iraqi landscape and has changed the politics of the regions to which they have shifted.

In regard to those Iraqis who tried to return, it was too dangerous for them to reclaim their homes which were seized by sectarian groups. In addition, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, despite his symbolic call for Iraqi refugees to return to their homeland, continued to practically support a political system based on an ethnic and sectarian quota system. Ministerial vacancies and the allocation of important government posts were determined on the basis of sect. This meant that competence and academic credentials were not considered when applying for a post. This policy of sectarian discrimination determined the government's orientations. Iraq has become unlivable for many Iraqis in the diaspora. Amos said, "Their [the Iraqis'] dreams of permanent return to Iraq were on hold." (154)

2. The Policy of Targeted Killing

Amos analyzes the policy of identity-based killing carried out by militias and elements of Iranian intelligence to eliminate Iraq's social, cultural and economic elite. These targeted killings became the norm after 2005 to force the Sunni community to leave, hence forcing demographic change based on sectarian lines.

This sectarian violence did not contradict the aims of the Americans and the British. According to Radwan al-Sayed, the project to end the Iraqi state was principally a US project, reflected in Paul Bremer disbanding the Iraqi army, police and security services and other state organs immediately after the invasion. The civil war (the Sunni-Shiite conflict) erupted between 2005 to 2008 during the US occupation, and with Washington's greenlight.

In May 2019, Bremer, who led the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq, said in an interview, "Removing Saddam Hussein opened thousand years of Sunni domination in the lands of Mesopotamia, beginning with the Abbasid Caliphate, the Turks, the British, the Hashemites and then the Hashemite Kingdom. Therefore, the Sunni minority held sway over the country for a thousand years, and I think this situation was not good." It is apparent from the aforementioned quote, that the United States supported the transfer of power from the Sunnis to the Shiites in Iraq. It seems that transferring power to the Shiites was a strategic goal for the United States — distinct from the historical incidents mentioned in Bremer's quote. This US plan created a profound shift in the priorities of Arab and Iranian decision makers, making the issue of sectarianism central to their planning. Accordingly, Arab countries, consequently, considered Iran to be their number one enemy.

Amos states that during Saddam Hussein's era, marriages between Sunnis and Shiites were common. In fact, the term "mixed marriage" was only used after 2003 when "Iraqis adopted more sectarian identities — a process that often tore families apart." She argues that the Shiites made good use of the opportunity of US support for them. Amos says, "Ever since the failure of the George H.W Bush administration to support the Shiite uprising against Saddam in 1991, Americans had recognized the potential of forming an alliance with the Shiite majority against Saddam."

Indeed, Shiite militiamen were seen guarding hospitals, vital state organs, and neighborhoods, while in the presence of US and Iraqi national army forces. These militiamen carried out identity-based killings without the United States or the Iraqi government intervening to prevent these killings. The ramifications of this bloodshed are still felt today.

3. The Establishment of Sectarian Security Services

Amos reviews the centrality of armed militias and the integral roles they were entrusted with to exclude or marginalize Sunnis politically, contributing to the mass exodus of Sunnis from their homeland.

Amos says that the Mahdi Army largely took over sectarian tasks, it was the largest Shiite militia at the time. It continued with its sectarian cleansing in the remaining mixed areas (Sunnis and Shiites) of Baghdad, to complete its mission before the full deployment of US forces. Amos states that this decisively

changed the sectarian landscape in the Iraqi capital and consequently “for the first time in history, Iraq’s future was in Arab Shiite hands.”

Sectarian militias continued to threaten Sunnis, even after the massive US military deployment. There were a lot of tragic Sunni stories such as a husband who was shot dead, a child kidnapped and then murdered, the mass rape of sons and daughters, and messages left at the doors of homes like “Leave or die.”

4. The Question of Iraqi Identity

Amos carefully analyzes an important issue: the struggle over Iraqi identity. Shiite militias have resorted to sectarian cleansing “to assert a new Iraqi identity — an identity based on sectarian allegiances that Saddam’s regime had submerged.” However, it seems that the new identity was not a purely Iraqi identity because “Former Baathists were targeted from the beginning, along with high-ranking army officers and air force pilots who had fought in the Iran-Iraq war.” This indicates that elements from outside Iraq were involved serving external agendas via assassinations and taking revenge for historical grievances.

Despite the internal differences in the Shiite house, all Shiite parties agreed on the sectarian cleansing policy, keeping the landscape for Shiites exclusively, to strengthen the new Iraqi identity. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki pledged to work towards “political reconciliation” but “He was unable or unwilling to reign in the Shiite militias in the capital — in particular, Sadr’s militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army).”

The Mahdi Army led cleansing campaigns against the Sunnis in some Baghdad neighborhoods in full view of the Iraqi government and US forces, erasing the identity of non-Shiite communities. Amos gives us an example of this in her book, “Hurriya, which means ‘freedom,’ had been a mixed neighborhood where Sunnis and Shiites lived together and married across sectarian lines during Saddam’s time, but by 2007 many of Hurriya’s Sunni residents had been driven out by the Mahdi militiamen and the neighborhood had become almost entirely a Shiite enclave.” So the question of identity: “what is Iraq?” was not determined by Iraq’s authority, nor by the Iraqi public, but by sectarian militias. The 2005 Constitution contributed to strengthening Iraqi sectarianism through quotas and allowing groups and parties to use sectarian, political and religious loyalties as their defense shield. For example, in northern Iraq, many Kurds considered Baghdad a foreign capital.

Therefore, according to Amos, Iraq is a state which has never had a clearly defined identity. The Iraqi people have never agreed on who they are, and what are their basic values, for example, is Iraq based on Islam or Arab nationalism? Amos highlights a pressing question for Iraqis: “How will Iraqi citizens live together within the same borders?”

The question of Iraqi national identity depends on strengthening the Iraqi constitutional state, with a need for Iraqis to form a social contract involving respect for all religious and sectarian groupings and ensuring the protection of minorities. By achieving the aforementioned, sectarianism in Iraq can be overcome, and the writ of the state can transcend sectarian loyalties.

Conclusion

In the twelfth chapter, Amos provides a lucid summary of the situation in Iraq, arguing that Iraq has become a different country now, and it has changed due to the sectarian civil war, in which Shiites won and Sunnis lost. There is no way to avoid this fact.

As long as militias are present and active, there is no hope that Baghdad, once a city where diverse communities lived in harmony with one another, will reclaim its historical legacy of religious tolerance. Nowadays, Baghdad has a distinctly Shiite outlook. On display during Shiite religious holidays are Shiite religious banners which are hoisted over most of the city. Many Sunni mosques in the city have been closed or destroyed.

The militias are not solely responsible for this transformation, Maliki's government is also to blame, it also wanted to make sure that Baghdad remained the capital of Shiites. There is internal and external Shiite consensus to create a new Iraqi identity, but it is a narrow and sectarian one that does not include all Iraqi communities and culture, nor does it reflect Iraq's rich civilization.