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Iraq (Shia) (1979 - 1998)

Shia Muslims make up 55 to 60% of Iraq's population. Since the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath party took control of Iraq's government in a 1968 coup, Shia political, religious, and cultural rights have been curtailed. In the late 1970s, oppression of the Shia became more violent as prominent clerics and religious students were exiled, imprisoned, and assassinated. During the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, thousands of Shia were deported and many were executed as potential supporters of Shia-majority Iran. In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, Shia uprisings in the south were repressed by the Iraqi military, and thousands were killed and injured by indiscriminately firing in residential areas. During the 1990s, the Iraqi military continued to attack Shia rebels and civilians in villages of the south and in the marshlands along the Iranian border. They also demolished holy sites and mosques, destroying ancient Shia manuscripts.

The Shia were a minority in the Ottoman rule, and they were denied access to political power under British rule, a condition that continued after Iraq became independent in 1932. Despite suffering religious discrimination, most Shia movements for power have been secular with socialist, democratic, or nationalist tendencies. When Saddam Hussein took the presidency in 1979, the leader of Iraq's Shia population, Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr, was put under house arrest, and the following year he was executed on Saddam's orders.

The Shia were divided over the Iran-Iraq war which began in 1980. Though no high-ranking Iraqi military officers were Shia, many soldiers were. Also, there are sectarian and ideological differences between Iranian Shia and Iraqi Shia. While Iranian Shia tend to favor political Islam, Iraqi Shia tend to prefer a secular government. Despite this, Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath party feared that the Shia population within Iraq might form an insurgency movement in league with Iran's revolutionary government. During the eight-year war, tens of thousands of Shia were exiled to Iran, and thousands more, particularly young men, were imprisoned or killed.

The day after an official ceasefire ended the 43-day Gulf War in 1991, Shia in southern Iraq and Kurds in the north revolted against Saddam's regime. Although the uprisings appeared to be spontaneous, a decade-old organized Shia movement called the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its military wing, the Badr Corps, soon took control. The revolt was brutally suppressed, but throughout the 1990s SCIRI became more prominent. The Iraqi government's response was to kill hundreds of Shia civilians and rebels each year, destroy villages and crops, and drain the wetlands that supported agricultural and livestock practices. Thousands of Shia were forcibly relocated from their villages and the traditional marsh areas in the south.

With the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the United States in 2003, the Shia have become the dominant political force in the new political regime in Iraq.

Print Resources

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Ragaei, Farhang, ed. (1993) *The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Anderson, Liam D. and Gareth R. V. Stansfield (2004) *The future of Iraq: dictatorship, democracy, or division?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Online Resources

Human Rights Watch (1992) *Endless Torment: The 1991 Uprising in Iraq And Its Aftermath*.

Project Ploughshares. *Armed Conflicts Report: Iraq - Shia Muslims*.

Minorities at Risk Project. *Shi'as in Iraq*.

Timeline

1977 - riots in Shia city of Karbala; Iraq military executes militants, clerics, students

1979 - Saddam Hussein assumes presidency; Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr put under house arrest; al-Sadr's supporters riot in Al Najaf, many exiled or killed

1980 - Al-Sadr executed; Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini calls for Iraqi Shia revolution; war begins between Iran and Iraq

1981 - thousands of Shia exiled to Iran

1982 - Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (SCIRI) formed in Iran

1988 - UN-brokered truce ends Iran-Iraq war

1990 - Iraq invades Kuwait

1991 - Gulf War forces Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait; Shia uprisings in southern cities; Iraqi forces kill thousands, ending rebellion

1992 - Iraq government begins destruction of marshlands; isolated Shia riots; hundreds of Shia imprisoned or killed

1998 - Iraq government begins crop, village destruction in Shia areas

1999 - Shia villages forcibly relocated

2003 - U.S.-led war overthrows Saddam Hussein