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## Chapter 3

### Islam and Democracy in Iraq

[I]t is clear that Muslims are not willing simply to adopt Western democratic models. The period of unquestioningly borrowing techniques and concepts from the Western experience has passed (if it ever took place), and now the effort is to establish authentically Islamic democratic systems. This effort is not inherently anti-Western, but it contains a recognition that there are significant problems with Western-style democracy ... [and that] major concepts in Western democracy have their analogues someplace in the Islamic tradition. (Esposito and Voll 1996: 30–1)

### **Islam and Democracy?**

The next historical epoch that must be addressed in any thorough analysis of the political history of Iraq is that which began with the founding of the Islamic religion in the seventh century and concluded with the fall of the Ottomans – the last great Islamic empire – at the beginning of the twentieth. For a significant portion of this same period, Europe wallowed in the so-called ‘Dark Ages’, caught between the past achievements of the Greco-Roman world and the future accomplishments of the continent after the Renaissance. While much recent scholarship has indicated that parts of Europe, such as Venice, the Nordic countries and the teachings of the Catholic church were practising or preaching at least quasi-democratic systems of governance (Byock 2002, Hittinger 2003, Kilcullen 1999, Stockwell 2011b, 2012), mostly the medieval period is known for the rise of European monarchs who insisted on the legitimacy and divinity of their hereditary regimes.

During this same period however the various Islamic empires not only ruled vast swathes of land across Eurasia and North Africa, they also became the epicentre of human civilization, the benchmark of scholarship and the hub of culture and creativity. Scholars of linguistics worked tirelessly to translate key texts from Greek, Hindu, Pahlavi and Syriac into Arabic and Latin; historians, geographers and travel writers compiled significant volumes that documented

the natural world, its people and their past; artists and writers brought new life to the poetic beauty of Arabic as a language and composed great works of literature; philosophers and legal thinkers expounded on both religious and secular questions, developing influential centres of learning and schools of law; scientists introduced key innovations and methodologies in fields such as medicine, mathematics, chemistry and astronomy; various schools and strands of Islam emerged which encouraged free thought and a robust exchange of ideas; and non-Muslims were accorded significant rights and freedoms with many working alongside their Muslim counterparts and achieving degrees of success and influence within the Islamic world (Hourani 2005 [1991], Lombard 1975, Saliba 2007, Watt 1972, 1987 [1962]).

This string of cultural, religious and artistic accomplishments has been – and continues to be – a significant thread in the socio-political fabric of Iraq. Islam is not only the majority religion in Iraq (making up about 95% of the population), it is also a fundamental characteristic of the myriad ways in which Iraqis have imagined themselves. It informs a rich array of cultural practices, is embedded into civil and political discourse, expressed in vibrant artistic motifs and is central to the practices of day-to-day life. Historically, from its earliest encroachment into Iraq during the seventh century and up until today, Islam has played a fundamental role in Iraqi national identity and the historical memory on which it is based. As we shall see in Chapter 4, in the 1920s the British installed Faisal, a Hashemite and the son of Sharif Hussayn, the Sharif of Mecca, as the first modern king of Iraq. Intrinsic to the subsequent reign of the Hashemite monarchy was their ability to harness their own cultural history and their ancestral connection to the Prophet Muhammad, and thereby legitimate their claim of being the rightful legatees of the Arab lands.

More recently, while Iraq under the Baath remained an ostensibly secular state, the Baath were nonetheless keen to re-engineer Iraq's classical Islamic past in ways similar to that of its Mesopotamian heritage. Most notably, as part of his own surreal cult of personality, Hussein also increasingly likened himself to a handful of key figures from Iraq's Islamic past. He routinely celebrated the achievements of the Abbasid caliph Al-Mansour, who had built the

original round city of Baghdad during the 8th century, with the Baathist propaganda machine frequently asserting 'Al-Mansour Mansuran' ('There are two Al-Mansours', literally, 'There are two victors') (Lassner 2000: 94). Another example can be found in Hussein's 'official' genealogy which 'proves' he was a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad's nephew, Ali, who is revered by the Sunni as one of the first four caliphs and especially by the Shia who continue to emphasize the legitimacy of Ali's line (Bengio 1998: 80). Hussein also frequently invoked the famous military general, Saladin, who was conveniently born in Hussein's hometown of Tikrit and was most famous for defeating the Christian crusaders and restoring Muslim dominion over Jerusalem. The creation of a connection between these historical figures and Hussein was very carefully constructed in order to cross ethno-religious sectarian divides: Al-Mansour was a Sunni Arab, Ali a Shia Arab and Saladin a Kurd. Further, these celebrations of Iraq's Islamic past carried with them strong Baathist undertones and were specifically engineered to demand loyalty to the regime.

However, neither the Hashemite monarchy nor the Baath genuinely wanted to engage with Islamic teachings on politics as this would pose a direct threat to authoritarian forms of power and advocate a more inclusive and democratic system of government. Instead, they both sought to connect the great achievements of the nation's Islamic past to the centralization of power. They ignored the teachings and practices of Islam which have emphasized diversity and debate among the polity and thus contributed substantially to the notion that Islam is simply anathema to democracy.

This sat well with Western analysts. As we have seen in Chapter 1, from at least as far back as the turn of the eighth century, Islam had been viewed pejoratively in Europe, and had been used to explain away any perceived or real failures in the region. This is also true of studies of Iraq, such as that of the British administrator and scholar Stephen Longrigg who had first gone into Iraq at the beginning of the First World War and remained until 1931. In his sweeping account of *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq* Longrigg examines in detail the evolution of the social and political landscape of Iraq from the Ottoman conquest (1534) through to the

conclusion of the nineteenth century. It is worth quoting a lengthy section from his conclusion as an example:

The country passed from the nineteenth century [a] little less wild and ignorant, as unfitted for self-government, and not less corrupt, than it had entered the sixteenth; nor had its standards of material life outstripped its standards of mind and character ... Government's essential duty of leading tribe and town together in the way of progress had scarcely been recognized, barely begun, when our period closes; in the yet clearer task of securing liberty and rights to the governed (however backward), it had failed more signally perhaps than any government of the time called civilized ... A harsh sentence on this seeming crime of neglected opportunities, of perverse backwardness, may be mitigated by several pleas. No Islamic state in modern times has reached the first rank among nations. The conservatism into which the tenets of that great religion are interpreted has proved incompatible with progress as it is ordinarily judged: and in the very air and aspect of the East there seems to lie an acquiescence, a lack of the forward impulse, which critics of an Eastern state should not ignore. (Longrigg 2002 [1925]: 321–2)

In Longrigg's typically Orientalist account, we find the very hallmarks of Oriental despotism, applied as it is to Iraq and blamed on the religion of Islam. For Longrigg, Iraq is wild and ignorant, corrupt, and deficient in every measure of material, intellectual and cultural life. In terms of Iraq being incapable of democracy, Longrigg is even clearer: the nation was simply unfit for self-government. The government that did exist, at that time a British installed and controlled democracy (see Chapter 4), had abjectly failed to secure the rights and liberties of the governed, the Iraqi people – who Longrigg refers to as 'backward'. But this was not the fault of the British, nor the ruling elite they brought to power, it was due to the fact that Iraq was a majority Islamic state. The 'perverse backwardness' of Iraq was caused by the 'conservatism' of Islam; it had 'proved incompatible with progress' and to foster 'an acquiescence, a lack of the forward impulse'.

While such Colonial-era discourses concerning the futility of bringing democracy to Iraq because of the nature of Islam are clearly disconcerting they are indicative of an epoch in which intellectual production in Europe concerning the East was built within an Orientalist framework. Indicative of the pervasive and insidious nature of such discourse, it is little wonder that such sentiments have been reiterated by various Western commentators in their discussion of the effort to bring democracy to Iraq following the invasion and occupation of 2003. To cite just one example, Diana West argued that the fundamental problem facing democracy in Iraq is Islam itself. She urges the US to acknowledge that the

failure to establish liberty and justice for all in Iraq – namely, freedom of conscience and equality before the law – is due to the nature of Islamic culture, not to the efficacy of American efforts. If, five years after September 11, we finally faced the fact that liberty in Islam – defined, literally, as ‘freedom from unbelief’ – has nothing to do with liberty in the West, we could finally understand why an Iraqi constitution enshrining sharia is wholly incompatible with everything our own democracy stands for, and is thus not something worth dying for. (West 2006)

In counteracting such Islamophobic media discourse, recent decades have seen several notable studies which have argued that, at various times and in various ways, the religion of Islam, its various empires and its civilization, have utilized political systems strikingly similar to what we have come to term democracy (Esposito and Voll 1996, Sachedina 2001, Soroush 2000). This chapter therefore builds on this literature to analyse the collective forms of government and egalitarian social movements found throughout both the history and doctrine of Islam. From the life of the Prophet through to the Ottoman era, the history of various Islamic empires and the teachings of its clerics and scholars reveal a picture very much at odds with the overwhelming consensus in the West that the religion of Islam is antithetical to democracy and works against inclusion, diversity and debate. Well before the advent of modern representative democracy in Europe, Islam enabled various forms of participatory governance and put in place certain power-monitoring institutions. Focusing the bulk of its attention on Iraq, this chapter

also documents the fundamental role that Baghdad played in promoting the democratic ethos via an active public sphere of learned scholars, great theologians and schools of jurisprudence. It concludes by noting that the re-examination of Iraqi Islamic history and politics not only raises a specific challenge to the received dichotomy between Western democracy and Oriental despotism, it also reveals new and exciting ways of thinking about democracy in Iraq today.

### **Democracy in Early Islam: The Prophet Muhammad and the Rashidun Caliphs**

Amid the harsh mountains and the dry gorge of Mecca, a man by the name of Muhammad ibn Abdallah was born into the Quraysh tribe in or around 570 CE.<sup>1</sup> In his youth, Muhammad came to prefer solitude and prayer over what he saw as the increasingly decadent and brutal world of the Arabs. Every year, around the month of Ramadan, Muhammad would retreat to a cave at Mount Hira, perched on the rocky steppes that surrounded his home city, where he would meditate and fast, sometimes for as long as several weeks at a time. On one such retreat toward the end of Ramadan in 610, Muhammad is believed to have been visited by the Archangel Gabriel in the form of a man who served as a conduit for God's divine revelations. The first of these revelations began with the Angel asking Muhammad to 'Recite!' and he replied: 'I am not a reciter'. This continued and after the third time the Angel recited to Muhammad the first five verses of the *Quran* (96.1–5). Initially, when Muhammad began to speak of his experiences publically he was overwhelmingly rejected, but over the next 21 years, the messages he received from God (*Allah*) through the Archangel Gabriel attracted an enormous following across

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<sup>1</sup> There are many accounts of the life and times of the Prophet Muhammad. As with many historical figures, particularly those who come to be revered by religious orders, even the best of these accounts relies heavily on anecdotes and oral narratives purposefully constructed to lionize the Prophet and promote the new religion, while the worst are little more than fanciful and idealistic tomes. Although they are therefore difficult to rely on with any degree of certainty, they do hold certain things in common and these commonalities provide a relatively reliable and accurate picture of the man and his undertakings. Perhaps one of the best and earliest accounts of the life of the Prophet Muhammad is Ibn Ishaq's *The Life of Muhammad: Apostle of Allah* (Ishaq 2003 [725]), but for a more recent account, see Martin Lings's *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Lings 1983).

Arabia. These divine messages were recounted to his brethren from memory and either transcribed or memorized by his followers, and were eventually collated into the *Quran* (the recitation). These revelations were accompanied by the Prophet's commentary on day to day issues, and the example he set for his followers, which went on to become the *Hadith* (the traditions).

At the centre of Muhammad's teachings, and a major theme of the *Quran*, was the concept of *tawheed*, belief in the one all-powerful God. Also at the heart of Islam was the notion that the Islamic community (*ummah*) would practise a form of social justice in which Muslims were expected to create a pious community founded on the principles of virtue, compassion, justice and the fair distribution of wealth (*Quran* 3.105). The *Quran* recognizes equality and condemns discrimination and prejudice based on tribe, race, gender or religion (*Quran* 49.13). Jews and Christians (*dhimmis*) were not forced to convert and were accorded high degrees of both civil and religious liberties, for the *Quran* maintained that all children of Adam are honourable, regardless of faith, colour, gender or race (*Quran* 3.113–4, 199; 5.69; 17.70; 29.46). Similarly, Islam brought great respect and rights to women, enabling them to inherit property, divorce disrespectful husbands and play an active role in the social and political life of their communities. Women are described as playing many forthright roles in the earliest days of Islam; they fought alongside men in battle and do not appear to have experienced Islam as an oppressive religion.

Beyond notions of social justice, however, were Islam's specifically political ordinances. One driving principle of Islamic governance – and indeed of Islamic law – is that of *shura* (consultation). The *Quran* frequently asserts that all political decisions need to be made in consultation with the *ummah*. For example, the Prophet Muhammad was regularly instructed to 'Take counsel with them [the community] in the conduct of affairs' (*Quran* 3.159) and the community itself was asked to 'conduct their affairs by mutual consent' (*Quran* 42.38). Such consultative practises were, as we shall see, repeatedly put into practise by the Prophet who

sought the counsel of men and women, elite and commoner, Muslim and non-Muslim, Arab and foreigner.

In 622, following years of persecution at the hands of the elite of Mecca, the Prophet and his followers migrated to the nearby city of Medina (*Yathrib*), whose people had already embraced the new faith and offered Muhammad and his followers sanctuary. This move to Medina is known as the *hijra* (migration) and can be seen as a decisive moment in Islamic history, effectively starting the Islamic calendar and cementing the popularity and strength of the new religion. Medina was a sprawling series of hamlets that housed three main Arab-Jewish tribes, as well as two main Arab-Muslim tribes. They had no centralized leadership, with each of the tribes subject to the authority of their own chieftain hierarchy, and the city had been locked in the grip of various tribal feuds.

One of the main reasons that Muhammad had been invited to Medina was the hope that he would be able to bring peace to the community. He was able to do so via a document that has come to be named the 'Constitution of Medina' which was based on the central principles of Islam as highlighted in the *Quran*. It is worth citing at length here:

This is a covenant given by Muhammad to the believers [i.e. non-Muslim monotheists, mostly the Jewish tribes of Medina] and Muslims of Quraysh, Yathrib [Medina], and those who followed them, joined them, and fought with them. They constitute one Ummah ... All pious believers shall rise as one man against whosoever rebels or seeks to commit injustice, aggression, sin, or spread mutual enmity between the believers, even though he may be one of their sons ... Any Jew who follows us is entitled to our assistance and the same rights as any one of us, without injustice or partisanship. This *Pax Islamica* is one and indivisible ... The Jews have their religion and the Muslims theirs. Both enjoy the security of their own populace and clients except the unjust and the criminal among them ... Each shall assist the other against any violator of this covenant. Their relationship shall be one of mutual advice and consultation, and mutual assistance and charity rather than harm and aggression ... The town of Yathrib shall constitute a sanctuary for the

parties of this covenant ... To every smaller group belongs the share which is their due as members of the larger group which is party to this covenant.  
(cited in Haykal 1976: 180–3)

Here, and throughout the remainder of the document, the Prophet created a formal covenant between all of the significant tribes and families of Medina, who each recognized him as their new political leader. It outlines the rights and procedures for conflict resolution and community action, it also guarantees each citizen their civil and religious rights and allows them equal participation in the daily life of the state. Throughout its forty-eight clauses, the document frequently asserts that the new community is to be governed by the principles of freedom, justice, equality and peace. It is adamant against despotism and demands that the community should not be governed by those who commit crime, practise corruption or injustice, or act with aggression and intolerance. It asserts instead that politics should be conducted according to the principles of ‘mutual advice and consultation, and mutual assistance and charity’. It even argues that such consultation is to be used in negotiations with foreign states, that the representatives of all parties should be present and that no negotiation should be conducted unilaterally. The significance of the Constitution of Medina is clear in terms of its democratic nature, its importance for the earliest Muslims and its relevance today. It also has specific relevance to the history of democracy, as it pre-dates both the *Magna Carta* and the *Declaration of Independence*.

The Constitution of Medina, along with the egalitarian message of the *Quran* and Muhammad’s undeniable talents as a diplomat, not only brought peace and prestige to Medina, but also brought a democratic impetus that was to serve as the basis for the politics practised by the Islamic community. This is demonstrated in the prelude to Islam’s first major battle, the ‘Battle of Badr’ in which the powerful Meccan elite retaliated against Muslim raids in 624 by cornering Muhammad’s forces at a watering hole. Prior to the battle, the Prophet initially sought the advice of his most senior companions who advised him to maintain a siege within the walls of Medina and not leave the city to fight. Muhammad was not convinced that this was the best

course of action however, and decided instead to convene an assembly of the entire Muslim community and seek their advice and opinion (Istanbuli 2001: 37). Less conservative in their views and more determined to fight, the community advised Muhammad to march out against the enemy (Lings 1983: 174). Not only did the Prophet accept their advice, but the Muslims went on to seize their first military victory despite the overwhelming odds in favour of the Meccans. As with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* discussed in the preceding chapter, Muhammad's desire to submit major decisions of war and peace to the entire community not only constitutes a major democratic achievement in its own right, it also parallels traditional Grecian or Roman assemblies of the arms-bearing men during times of war.

Another example of the democratic nature of early Islamic politics comes shortly after the Muslims conquered Mecca in 630 when the Prophet received a delegation representing the Christians of Najran (a small town in the south-west of the Arabian Peninsula). They had come to negotiate a peace treaty with the Muslims. Instead of demanding their conversion, the Prophet signed a peace treaty with Najran that demonstrates Islam's central ideals of religious freedom and civil liberties. It reads:

To the Najranites, and to those living among them, the protection of God, and the pledge of Muhammed, the Prophet and the Apostle of God, is conferred upon them their faith, their land and their properties, upon those who are absent or present, upon their caravans, their sanctuaries and their sacred possessions ... If anyone among them raises a claim for a right, then justice and equality will be asserted. No oppressed there will be or oppressors in Najran. (cited in Istanbuli 2001: 45)

Shortly after conquering Mecca, Muhammad returned to Medina and fell gravely ill, passing away in 632 at the age of 63. In the course of one lifetime, Muhammad ibn Abdallah had successfully brought Islam into the world, a religion centred on the concept of one true God and notions of social justice, religious law and piety. This provided the framework through which he was able to unite the warring factions of much of the Arabian peninsula into a single polity, adhering to a very specific set of legal, social, moral, military and political norms. Such norms

also included fundamental ideals of human equality and the need for consultative and deliberative mechanisms in governance. From his recitation of the *Quran*, the Constitution of Medina, the various peace treaties he implemented and his practical and personal examples emerged a pragmatic framework for the equitable conduct of human affairs. In turn, this created an entirely new civilization that would come to control much of the known world, to make unprecedented advances in military, cultural and scientific endeavours and leave behind a democratic legacy that is rarely acknowledged today.

The death of Muhammad brought with it a question of deep concern to the *ummah*: who would lead the followers of Islam now? A series of complex political deliberations ensued, particularly in Mecca and Medina, with a number of competing factions jostling for power and control. It was Abu Bakr (632–4), the Prophet's closest friend and father-in-law, who, in a demonstration of the democratic nature of the early Islamic period, was eventually elected by the majority of votes to be the first *Caliph* (Steward) of the growing Islamic community. The election was also ratified by the community itself as they congregated in the mosque and swore allegiance to him. Abu Bakr's incumbency marks the first of four leaders, collectively known as the *Rashidun Caliphate* (Rightly-Guided Caliphs), who were all early converts to Islam as well as being close friends or family of the Prophet. Despite the fact that Abu Bakr was in office for only two years, he dealt with a very tumultuous era in Islamic politics, including the *Ridda Wars* (Wars of Apostasy) which quelled various rebellions from across the *ummah*. What is particularly interesting is that while such military campaigns, like those of all expanding empires, were often bloody and destructive, the campaigns themselves were guided by nominally democratic virtues. Abu Bakr issued several pieces of advice to the leaders of the army, including the fair treatment of enemy soldiers, how best to receive envoys, and the use of consultation in military strategy: 'If you consulted the others, be truthful to them, so you may get from them the true counsel' (cited in Istanbuli 2001: 59).

Such military strategy was to prove crucial to the campaigns against the Sassanid and Byzantine Empires that were conducted under the leadership of Abu Bakr's key advisor and

successor, Umar ibn Al-Khattab (634–44). Although Umar was appointed by Abu Bakr, his authority was endorsed by an assembly of the Islamic community in Mecca. Perhaps Umar's most well-known achievement was the expansion of the Islamic empire beyond the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> Included in this, was Islam's first real encroachment into today's Iraq where the Muslims defeated the Sassanids at the Battle of Qadisiyya (637), famously leading to the capture of Ctesiphon, and in time, the collapse of the entire Sassanid Empire. As with his predecessor, Umar's management of the Islamic military was conducted according to relatively democratic principles. In one particular letter concerning military issues, for example, Umar points out that his decisions are not only based on his interpretations of the teachings of Islam, but that he 'consulted, too, the companions of the Prophet, who, each one of them has voiced his opinion' (cited in Istanbuli 2001: 60).

Before his untimely death, Umar nominated an administrative body composed of six of his most prominent companions and entrusted them with choosing his successor from among themselves. In this way, Uthman ibn Affan (644–56) was eventually elected to the position of *caliph*, following the approval of the community. Uthman had been among the first converts to Islam and is perhaps best known for ordering the compilation of the *Quran* as a written text. However, Uthman often privileged his fellow Umayyad family members for senior positions over perhaps more deserving candidates; he gave the important post of the governor of Syria to an Umayyad of rising power and prestige, Muawiyah. Such nepotism further eroded the confidence of the majority of Muslims in Uthman's leadership and his rivals murdered him in 656 in Medina.

A congregation in the Prophet's Mosque then elected the Prophet's cousin, Ali bin Abi Talib (656–61), to become the fourth and final of the Rashidun caliphs. He believed, as had his predecessors, that such a decision was only valid if the majority of his immediate community

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the Arab conquests in these early days as well as later successes, see Hugh Kennedy's recent *The Great Arab Conquests* (Kennedy 2008).

endorsed the decision, which they did by freely pledging their loyalty to him. This is not surprising given the fact that Ali was a devout Muslim and believed in the Islamic principles of justice and the importance of being compassionate towards the subject peoples of the empire. Ali was also the only one of the *Rashidun caliphs* to have been a blood relative of Muhammad and the descendants of this prestigious blood line have been highly revered by the Shia sect of Islam ever since in their belief that only a descendant of Muhammad should lead the *ummah*. Despite his esteemed lineage, Ali's leadership was fraught with problems from the outset. When Ali sought to challenge the growing power of the Umayyads in their Syrian stronghold of Siffin (today's Ar-Raqqah in Syria) in 657, the two forces reached a stalemate (Istanbuli 2001: 74–81). A council of arbitration was set up, and charged with the duty of deciding who should lead the *ummah* on the basis of the *Quran* (Wellhausen 1975 [1901]: 1–7). This did not work in Ali's favour and the Islamic world was temporarily split into two: Ali controlled Iraq and Arabia while Muawiyah ruled Syria and Egypt. This further eroded Muslim confidence in Ali and he was eventually murdered in 661.

Aside from the time of the Prophet, the era of the Rashidun caliphs represents the most significant epoch of Islamic history. This is as true for the Sunni majority, who revere the governance of all four of the Rashidun caliphs, as it is for the Shia minority who continue to emphasize the legitimacy of Ali's line. This era not only saw the rapid expansion of Islam and its territories, but also saw the democratic ideals laid down by the Prophet put into action. As Noah Feldman has pointed out, the Rashidun caliphs 'were understood to be selected by people, not God; they were subject to God's law as described in the *Quran* and the sayings of the Prophet; and they were expected to engage in some sort of consultation with the community they governed' (Feldman 2003: 52). The Rashidun were not the Oriental despots that Muslim leaders are so often assumed to be, but ruled in accordance with the notions of social justice and equality that underpinned Islam and had become normative amongst the *ummah* of their time.

### **Islamic Bureaucracy, Theology and Philosophy in Iraq**

With Ali out of his way, Muawiyyah (661–80) seized the opportunity to establish his own *caliphate* out of the stronghold of Damascus. This was the beginning of the Umayyad dynasty which was to last for a little under one hundred years (661–750) and was to see the lands of Islam transformed into a unified empire with a common identity and ideology. It is often assumed that Muawiyyah was able to achieve such unity because he was the first leader of the Muslims to declare himself king. There is no denying that the leadership of the Muslim community had not only shifted physically from its traditional heartland in Mecca and Medina, but had transformed ideologically with many of the Umayyads ruling in a much more secular and autocratic fashion than their predecessors. However, the Umayyads still had to govern traditional Arab Muslims, many of whom lionized the days of the Prophet and the Rashidun. The Umayyads therefore sought to balance their move towards autocracy with traditional methods of Arab governance such as consultation, popular elections and public ratification. They were known to adopt

several institutions of Beduin democracy – such as the Wufud, deputations from provinces and the principal tribes – to consult the views of such assemblies on as many occasions as possible, [and] to associate them openly with public business by recognizing their right to remonstrate. (Houtsma, Wensinck, Gibb, and Heffening 1993: 620)

While later Umayyad caliphs like Umar II (717–20) were elected by a wide franchise and had the people's overwhelming support, the Umayyad period also saw a number of morally weak, cowardly and murderous individuals assume the head of the empire. By the time Marwan II (744–50) had taken control of the empire, anti-Umayyad sentiment was rife and he was forced to spend much of his incumbency desperately trying to maintain power.

Harnessing popular resentment of the Umayyads, particularly among the Arab Shia and the non-Arab converts to Islam (*mawalis*) who were often not treated equally, was a group of Arabs who had been garnering political momentum since around 715. They claimed to be the

descendants of one of the uncles of the Prophet, Abbas ibn Abd Al-Muttalib,<sup>3</sup> and they emanated from Kufa in Iraq. By 743 the movement, known as the Abbasids, had attained an almost messianic momentum across Persia and in 747 the black banners of the Abbasids were first raised around Merv (in today's Turkmenistan). In 749 the Abbasids openly controlled Kufa and the following year they won a decisive victory against the Umayyads at the Battle of the Zab in Iraq (Kennedy 2005: 1–10). This saw the instalment of the Abbasid dynasty which was to maintain official power over much of the *ummah* for the next five hundred years (750–1258). 'Broadly speaking', as Amira Bennison puts it, 'the appeal of the Abbasid revolution was ... it offered a fairer Islamic order in which Muslims, whatever their origin, would be able to participate on equal terms' (Bennison 2009: 24).

Despite its promise, the Abbasid dynasty began with Abu Al-Abbas Al-Saffah (750–4), who became known by the unfortunate but apt sobriquet of 'the blood-shedder' due to his brutal massacre of the Umayyads and their supporters. Such blood-thirsty politics continued under the reign of his brother, Abu Jafar Al-Mansur (754–75) who murdered all of the Shia leaders that he considered a credible threat to his leadership. This cruelty aside, Al-Mansur is perhaps best remembered for the fact that he ordered the building of the Abbasid's new capital, the round city of Baghdad, in 762. Due to its strategic location on the banks of the Tigris and its connection to various trade routes, Baghdad was quickly transformed into a cultural and economic hub, eventually becoming a bustling metropolis that hundreds of thousands of people called home. The creation of Baghdad was a turning point in the history of Iraq. Already home

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<sup>3</sup> It is from the name Abbas ibn Abd Al-Muttalib that the Abbasids got their name. Abbas had been the paternal uncle of the Prophet Muhammad and he had played an important role in Muhammad's family, even going as far as protecting the Prophet against his enemies in the earliest years of Islam. However, claiming the lineage of Abbas was nowhere near as significant as being a descendent of Ali, as Abbas was neither a descendent of the Prophet nor a Muslim (Kennedy 2005: 3-4). Despite this, as Hugh Kennedy has pointed out elsewhere, the Abbasid claim to the caliphate would have been strong given the broad understanding of 'family' in the eighth century and the reverence held for all relations of the Prophet (Kennedy 1986: 124-5).

to the garrison towns of Kufa and Basra, Iraq soon became the centre of the Muslim world and the bastion of Islamic civilization.

From his new capital Al-Mansur was able to enact a series of revolutionary changes to the government of the *ummah*. This included his own personal style of governance which was refreshingly concerned with the needs of the people. He was widely known for his piety, but also for his political insight, his sharp wit and his great public oratory. Following the Friday prayers in the newly erected mosque of central Baghdad, the caliph would stand before a large audience ranging from the wealthy elite to the everyday commoner. He would deliver powerful political speeches and encourage people to question and debate openly his policies and agendas. As Hugh Kennedy notes, 'He had a ready response to the hecklers who occasionally dared to challenge him ... in Mansur's time the caliph could be seen and heard by anyone who came to Friday prayers in the great mosque of the capital' (Kennedy 2005: 14).

Beyond his willingness to engage with his subjects, Al-Mansur also set in place a series of bureaucratic changes that further developed and refined those of the Umayyads. Under Al-Mansur, an egalitarian bureaucracy emerged in which any man of adequate ability could ascend the hierarchy of the court and administration. Foremost in this hierarchy were the powerful chief viziers of the Barmakid family who descended from Persian aristocracy and held enormous sway over the Abbasids. There were also the military elite and key strategists whose opinions were regularly sought in matters both soldierly and civilian. Other courtiers of more humble origins include the office of the *khatib* (secretary), which was held by a highly intelligent commoner responsible for managing the details of provincial finances. Such a sophisticated political scene suggests that Al-Mansur was not a tyrant. The caliph was enveloped within a deeply complex political environ in which various stakeholders competed, often on behalf of the people, to promote various agendas, policies and reforms.

This system was to continue under the leadership of later caliphs like Muhammad ibn Mansur Al-Mahdi (775–85), Musa Al-Hadi (785–6), and then perhaps the Abbasid dynasties most well-known caliph, Harun Al-Rashid (786–809). It is widely understood that Harun ruled

as an absolute monarch and claimed himself the ‘Shadow of God on Earth’, living an opulent lifestyle and leaving many of the affairs of the state to his courtiers and viziers. Yet Harun was also an avid patron of both cultural and scientific endeavours who utilized his enormous wealth and power to encourage the pursuit of knowledge and the practise of varied artistic forms. Perhaps his most well known accomplishment was the foundation of the *Bayt Al-Hikmah* (The House of Wisdom), an intellectual institution later run by his son, Abu Jafar Al-Mamun (813–33).

The early Abbasid period also witnessed the formation of the *Mazalim* (court of complaint) and other mechanisms and institutions which enabled citizens to bring grievances about injustices or maladministration to the caliphal representative (Kennedy 2005: 34). One such representative was the famous Barmakid vizier, Yahya, who would find a line of petitioners at his front door every morning and who would work long into the night to make sure that all of their grievances were heard and the most amicable solutions found (Kennedy, 2005: 43). In addition, the Barmakid salons which were scattered across Baghdad, served as ‘a forum in which ideas could be discussed with a freedom not possible in the more circumscribed surroundings of the caliph’s own audience’ (Kennedy 2005: 65). Further evidence of this culture of debate and difference can be found in an excerpt from a letter sent by Hashimi, a cousin of the caliph Al-Mamun, to an opponent. He writes:

bring forward all the arguments you wish and say whatever you please and speak your mind freely. Now that you are safe and free to say whatever you please appoint some arbitrator who will impartially judge between us and lean only towards the truth and be free from the empery of passion, and that arbitrator shall be Reason, whereby God makes us responsible for our own rewards and punishments. Herein I have dealt justly with you and have given you full security and am ready to accept whatever decision Reason may give for me or against me. (Hashim cited in Arnold 1961 [1913])

Perhaps the best indication of the ongoing democratic legacy within Islam in the Abbasid epoch is not found among the highest echelons of the state, but among the clergy and the scholars.

Despite the common misconception in the West that Islam has never enabled a distinction between ‘church’ and ‘state’, there is wide consensus among scholars of the early Abbasid period (750–833) that it was constituted by a distinct separation between the *ulama* (religious scholars) and the caliph. Because the caliph failed to live up to the theocratic virtues of the early leaders of the community, the devout looked increasingly to the rising power of the *ulama* for both spiritual and political guidance rather than to the court of the caliph (Lapidus 1973, 1975). In this way, the *ulama* came to form an alternative pillar of power and authority to the Abbasid state many centuries before similar European developments and, just as in later Europe, the ‘church’ served as not only a moral compass for the people, but also as an effective check on the political power of the state (Lapidus 1975).

For their part, the *ulama* held the responsibility of producing the definitive guide to Islamic thought and life, the *Shariah* (Islamic law). To do this, they drew not only on the *Quran* and *Hadith*, but also on Quranic ideals (*fiqh*) in the hope that they would develop a better understanding of God and his desire for the *ummah*. From here, the *Shariah* developed into a complex code of legal prescriptions in which ‘local rulers and judges were called upon to make many decisions within the general framework of the developing understanding of the fundamentals of Islam in diverse contexts’ (Esposito and Voll 1996: 44). Much to the chagrin of the caliphs however, the *Shariah* became a benchmark of religious, political and juridical virtue that generally opposed the authoritarian and decadent nature of the state. As Karen Armstrong has noted,

The *Shariah* totally rejected the aristocratic, sophisticated ethos of the court. It restricted the power of the caliph, stressed that he did not have the same role as the Prophet or the *rashidun*, but that he was only permitted to administer the sacred law. Courtly culture was thus tacitly condemned as un-Islamic. The ethos of the *Shariah*, like that of the *Quran*, was egalitarian. There were special provisions to protect the weak, and no institution, such as the caliphate or the court, had any power to interfere with the personal decisions and beliefs of the individual. Each Muslim had a unique responsibility to obey God’s

commands, and no religious authority, no institution (such as 'The Church') and no specialized group of 'clergy' could come between God and the individual Muslim. All Muslims were on the same footing; there was to be no clerical elite or priesthood acting as an intermediary. (Armstrong 2000: 52)

It is within this atmosphere that the *ulama* began to further refine the machinations of *shura*, stipulating that Muslim leaders must consult with their subordinates and acquire their consent (Hassouna 2001: 50). In theory, this posited that a consultative council should be elected by the people whose support the leader legally required in order to administer the affairs of the state (Choudhury 1990: 45). In larger states, the *shura* would take the form of a *Majlis Al-Shura* (national assembly) which was designed to be truly representative of the entire community and 'therefore the members of the *majlis* must be elected by means of the widest possible suffrage, including both men and women' (M. Asad 1980 [1961]: 45). At the very least, the *shura* was intended to secure 'the people's right to choose their government freely, openly and fearlessly from among themselves at all levels from the lowest to the highest' (Pasha 1993: 70–1). Further to this, Islamic law of this time also prescribed several other concepts analogous to the fundamentals of democracy such as *Ijma* (consensus), *Ijtihad* (independent interpretive judgement) and the concurrent condemnation of *Fitnah* (civil disorder) matched with the tolerance of *Ikhtilaf* (disagreement). In addition, Syed Pasha notes that, under Islamic law, *Al-Naas* (the people) also have the right to life and property, to choose their beliefs and behaviour, to know, to read, to write, to speak, to have power and – most importantly – the right to choose their government (Pasha 1993: 67–71).

Paralleling the clergy's development of the *Shariah* was the work of the scholars of this time. Al-Mamun was himself a Mutazilite and therefore believed that theoretical reason and rationalism were the arbiters of revelation. Under his leadership, the *Bayt Al-Hikma* attracted scholars, artists, philosophers and scientists who travelled from across the Muslim world to visit and work in the library. They also convened in public assemblies, presided over by Al-Mamun, in which theological, political and philosophical debates over the most radical ideas of the time

– even including questions about the legitimacy or style of Al-Mamun’s reign – were conducted in a collegial environment that upheld strict rules of intellectual candour (Fakhry 2004 [1970]: 10). Later, during the reign of another Abbasid caliph, Al-Mutawakkil (847–61), this atmosphere continued as scholars worked tirelessly to translate key philosophical and scientific texts from Greek, Persian and Syriac (Saliba 2007).

After the death of Al-Mamun in 833, however, the socio-political landscape of the Abbasid Empire, and indeed the Islamic world, began to change dramatically. Among the myriad reasons for these changes, was the fact that an ever increasing number of people converted to Islam. As they converted, the citizens of the provinces ‘demanded to be admitted to the political process as full members of the Muslim community. In this way the provinces came to be dominated by men whose roots and family were entirely local’ (Kennedy 1986: 202–3). Although they were Muslims, their loyalty to a caliph which could be thousands of miles away and in a land they had never visited was difficult to earn and maintain. While the Abbasids were to remain the official figureheads of most of the Islamic world for centuries to come, their power and influence waned substantially from the late ninth century onwards and would never re-gather its strength. Instead, political plurality became the norm as important regions such as Central Asia, North Africa, Iran, Egypt, as well as parts of Syria, developed their own systems of governance and paid little more than token homage to the Abbasid caliphs, with some going so far as to directly challenge their claim to authority.

One very substantial challenge to the power of the Abbasids came during the so-called ‘Shia century’ which saw the Buyids (945–1055) extend their influence out from their stronghold in Iran to conquer much of Iran, Iraq and the surrounding areas. The Buyids occupied Baghdad in 945 but they did not overthrow the Abbasid caliph because they reasoned that a Shia toppling of the Sunni elite might cause a popular revolt among their mostly Sunni subjects (Jiwa 1992: 64–5). Among their many notable achievements, the Buyids are credited with ushering in what Adam Mez has famously termed ‘The Renaissance of Islam’ (Mez 1937). This renaissance saw a renewed cultural florescence as the patronage of the arts, philosophy,

sciences and theology were no longer solely the province of the state, but spread outwards to a wider circle of wealthy or influential people interested in fostering achievement. In Joel Kraemer's study of the Buyid period he notes that it

witnessed a powerful assertion of individualism, a burst of personal expression, in the domains of literary creativity and political action. It thrived in a remarkably cosmopolitan atmosphere. Baghdad ... [was] the rendezvous of scholars from far and wide, of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Philosophers belonged to a class of their own, transcending particular loyalties, united by the pursuit of wisdom, the love of reason ... [Baghdad] was permeated by a spirit of scepticism and secularism. Rebellion against convention, characteristic of free-spirited poets, was often accompanied by libertinism. (Kraemer 1992 [1986]: vii)

Because of this spirit of individualism, cosmopolitanism and secularism, the philosophers, poets, artisans and scholars of this period added an additional and very important layer to the complex social-strata of Baghdad. Like the *ulama*, they came to wield significant power in part because of their enormous popularity and in part because their ideas served as an alternative voice to both the clergy and the state. This meant that, in addition to the mosque and the court, scholarly discussion of socio-political issues now took place in independent schools, arcades, city-squares, gardens, markets, and bathhouses. Such discussions were also very heterogeneous, with debates common between Arabs and Persians, Jews and Christians, Sunni and Shia, Sufi and atheist, poet and philosopher. Many of the more successful scholars and poets had their own schools and delivered lectures to huge crowds. According to Kraemer, 'On special occasions, large assemblies were convened for discussion' where 'a question was initially proposed and then theses and antitheses stated in turn' (Kraemer 1992 [1986]: 56).

Central to this cultural renaissance was the intellectual legacy of Greek antiquity. Although, as mentioned earlier, the translation and transmission of Grecian texts had begun during earlier Abbasid times, by the time of the Buyids, Islamic scholars had thoroughly studied the works of antiquity. Aside from Greek scholars such as Euclid, Galen, Ptolemy and Socrates,

scholars of the Buyid epoch had a particular penchant for Plato and especially Aristotle, whom they nicknamed ‘The First Teacher’ (Vagelpohl 2008). At the tenth-century school of Aristolian studies in Baghdad, for example, students and scholars had access to Aristotle’s complete *oeuvre* (Kraemer 1992 [1986]: xx, xxiii). Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought dominated their investigations into natural philosophy, their reflections on ethics and their rich debates on politics.

This Grecian-inspired Islamic renaissance has several important dimensions that must be spelled out here. First, it had an immediate effect on various religious scholars who attempted to reconcile the pagan beliefs and erudite philosophies of the Greeks with their Islamic religiosity (Alon 1991). This brought about a form of religious disputation known as the *Kalam*, where ‘The arguments put forward ... were expected to conform to the Aristotelian pattern, that is to say to be intellectual in conception and dialectical in form’ (Rice 1961: 115). Second, given the fact that the Islamic world now stretched from Spain to the borders of India, the knowledge of the ancient Greeks was spread further and wider than it had ever been in antiquity, reaching new and diverse audiences. As they translated and added important developments to Grecian works on science and philosophy, the Islamic world transmitted ancient knowledge across much of the known world, including into Europe.

Finally, what is also significant about the Islamic exposure to Grecian thought is that it would have included Greek musings on political matters and models. Islamic scholars were particularly fond of the Aristotelian dictum that ‘man is naturally a political animal’ (Kraemer 1992 [1986]: 18). Clearly the Islamic scholars of the Buyid dynasty had access to works such as Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* and Aristotle’s *Politics* which concern themselves with the Grecian experiment with *demokratia* (Aristotle 1943 [350 BCE], Plato 1975 [360 BCE], 1975 [380 BCE]). This is certainly true of the Persian born Shia philosopher Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (Alpharabius in Latin, 870–950) who, whilst working in Buyid Baghdad, wrote expositions on *The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* and penned important works such as the *Book of Political Science* and *The Virtuous City* (Al-Farabi 1962 [935]-b, 1996 [948], 2001 [930–45]). Al-Farabi

not only laid the ‘foundation of logic, metaphysics and politics in the world of Islam’ he also came to be known as ‘the “Second Master”, the first master being Aristotle’ (Campanini 2008 [2004]: 10). Of particular relevance here is the connection that Al-Farabi drew between happiness and politics in *The Virtuous City* in which he argued that

man cannot attain the perfection, for the sake of which his inborn nature has been given to him, unless many (societies of) people who co-operate come together who each supply everybody else with some particular need of his, so that as a result of the contribution of the whole community all the things are brought together which everybody needs in order to preserve himself and to attain perfection. (Al-Farabi 1996 [948]: 205)

This connection between happiness and politics is further elaborated in his *Attainment of Happiness* in which Al-Farabi argues that ‘The human things through which nations and citizens of cities attain earthly happiness in this life and supreme happiness in the life beyond are of four kinds: theoretical virtues, deliberative virtues, moral virtues and practical arts’ (Al-Farabi 1962 [935]-a: 13). In other words, the attainment of human perfection not only involves an appreciation of science, religion and the arts, it also requires man to deliberate; to be happy, people must co-operate with their fellow citizens in order to reach collective decision towards the common good. Al-Farabi also proposed a radical reform of the politics of the Arab caliphate premised on Aristotelian and Platonian philosophy. While he did not go as far as advocating a re-birth of the Grecian form of *demokratia*, he did argue that the caliph – as successor of the Prophet – must conform to the principles of good governance as espoused by the ancient Greeks (Walzer 2007: 166).

These ideas had a profound influence on many successive generations of Islamic intellectuals, from Abu Ali Al-Husayn Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037) to Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) (Khaldun 1967 [1377]; Sina 1973 [1012]). One particular Sunni philosopher is worth mentioning here, Abu Al-Walid Muhammad Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–98) who followed Plato’s critique of Greece to argue that Islamic regimes such as the Almohads were too democratic (Rushd 1974 [1165]). For Averroes,

Democracy is the system in which people, feeling free from bonds and constraints, abandon themselves to pleasures and desires. In a democracy, the heart of society and the very real goal for which the state exists is the family; there are laws, but a powerful majority betrays the multitude and a state of war and violence, stimulated by human passions, gains the upper hand. (Campanini 2008 [2004]: 157)

Averroes thought that such messy and bellicose democracies therefore created the need for an aristocratic elite who were forced to rule tyrannically over the people. Such a situation was unjust and therefore the antithesis of the model both Plato and Averroes preferred: that of a virtuous state ruled by a wise and benevolent ruler, what Plato referred to as the philosopher-king. The notion that Islamic philosophers like Al-Farabi and the later Averroes were familiar with, and added to, the Grecian literature on democracy is a widely under-recognized aspect of the history of democracy. While such Islamic philosophers may not have explicitly argued in favour of democracy, they did understand its central principles and did not argue against it because of some fundamental contradiction with Islam.

Returning to Iraq, it is important to note that the Buyids eventually succumbed to a band of Turks from northern Khorasan, the Seljuks (1035–1194) who despised the Buyid Shia influence over Baghdad and sought to replace it with their own Sufi-inspired Sunni faith. Like the Buyids, the Seljuks recognized the significance of the Abbasid caliph to the wider *ummah* and left him on the throne even though he became increasingly isolated from the real business of government. Politically, the Seljuk *sultanate* (rulers) continued the tradition of plurality in political life and allowed many autonomous states to exist within its jurisdiction (Bennison 2009: 47). The Seljuks derived their power from the local councils and institutions that thrived across their empire. Each of these provincial outposts had their own civil official who acted on behalf of the *sultan* and served as a link between the central government and the people, often representing the latter to the former. Generally speaking, the appointment of a local official was not in the hands of the state or its representatives, but occurred via local political mechanisms, which included elections by popular vote (Bulliet 1978: 47).

The central government was made up of a number of civil administrators inherited from Abbasid and Buyid times. However, the Seljuks expanded the state bureaucracy into a complex machine governed by five major *diwans* (ministerial departments) including that of finance, diplomacy, court affairs, the army, and the ministry of the vizierate which oversaw the others (Klausner 1973: 16–8). Although the vizier remained the most powerful civil official of the state, the Seljuks saw the rise of state institutions which mitigated any moves towards empery. An indication of its egalitarian nature, was that even the most lowly scribe could ascend the hierarchy to the rank of vizier, as long as he held the required experience, education and savvy (Klausner 1973: 19). To become a minister, the candidate underwent the procedure of being brought before the assembly of the *sultan* and his court and made to deliver key policy speeches to win over their support before being elected to the post (Rice 1961: 90).

With a Sunni authority regaining control of the *ummah*, the *ulama* also re-emerged as a significant political force during the time of the Seljuks. The *madrasas* (religious schools) also expanded in their role, bringing with them certain prestige and power to Sunni Islamic knowledge. As Carla Klausner has noted, the religious classes ‘played a significant role in preserving the balance of power between the temporal and spiritual authorities’ they ‘often acted in a more public capacity as envoys and mediators’ and ‘in general were often the spokesmen of and on behalf of the people’ (Klausner 1973: 23). Although this role gradually weakened as a number of the *ulama* became assimilated into the state bureaucracy, the Seljuk epoch still maintained a determined separation between religion and politics.

This separation continued centuries later when, after 1534, Iraq came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire (1299–923). Part of the reason for the Ottoman Empire’s endurance and success was its shrewd understanding of the systems of power and local governance that existed throughout its extensive and multitudinous regions. Generally speaking, the Ottomans believed that a strong, civilized state was a cosmopolitan one. They were therefore very tolerant of the region’s many minority groups, such as the myriad of Jewish and Christian communities, even going as far as allowing these communities to be governed by Halakhan or Canon law

respectively, under the *millet* (nation) system. Beyond the freedoms accorded to religious minorities, the Ottoman Empire also encouraged a relatively robust civil society in which secondary structures such as tribal organizations, village councils and trade guilds not only thrived, but also wielded significant power over policy formation and governance (Gibb and Bowen, 1950). This democratic culture extended out into the many coffee houses of Istanbul and other cities like Baghdad where lively and scholarly debate often focused on the machinations of state politics and the pertinent political issues of the time (Arjomand 2004). There were also a number of formal limits on the *sultan's* ability to be autocratic, including the convening of several ad-hoc consultative assemblies made up of dignitaries which convened 'at times of serious international emergencies', where 'the right to express opinion was free' and the 'emergent consensus in such assemblies had a bearing on the *sultan's* subsequent decisions' (Gerber 2002: 79). In summarizing his work on the democratic impetus within various bureaucratic mechanisms and informal practices of the Ottoman Empire, Haim Gerber concludes that 'there is ample evidence that Ottoman society featured several institutions that worked on the basis of autonomous powers and initiatives' which were able to express 'the entire gamut of relations between the Ottoman government and the populace' (Gerber 2002: 80).

In addition to such complex and egalitarian politics, the Ottomans were also a decidedly Sunni Islamic Empire and even the *sultan* was subject to the legal prescriptions of *Shariah* law. As they had in earlier centuries, the *ulama* wielded significant power over the government. They formed a sphere of influence separate to the state, held the government to account via their religious credibility, and exercised important administrative, juridical and even economic judgements (Nieuwenhuis 1982: 27–8). They had the right to veto any decision or law made by the state if they deemed it to be in conflict with Islamic law (Shaw 1976: 134–9). Beyond this, the most senior member of the *ulama*, the *Shaykh Al-Islam*, could actually depose the *sultan* if he violated the *Shariah*, a power which was used in the usurpation of Sultans Ibrahim (1648), Mehmed IV (1687), Ahmed III (1730), and Selim III (1807) (Esposito and Voll 1996: 48).

In the region now known as Iraq, the Ottomans at first tried to rule directly by installing their own representatives to positions of power (Nieuwenhuis 1982: 25). However, in time, and in line with their *millet* policy of regional and religious autonomy, the Ottomans issued relative independence to the Mamluk *pashas* (governors) in Baghdad and Basra, the prominent Kurdish families in and around Mosul and the various tribal orders and principalities that scattered the rural areas of Iraq (Preston 2003: 24–5, 107, Tripp 2007 [2000]: 8–10). As with other parts of the Ottoman Empire, although these regional governments officially came under the auspices of Istanbul, they retained considerable autonomy (Hechter and Kabiri 2004: 8). This is especially true of the Mamluks, who were Georgian Christian soldiers taken from their families at childhood and converted to Islam. The Ottomans installed them in Baghdad as both administrative and military minions but under the leadership of Hasan Pasha (1704–23) they began to assert their dominance and became increasingly independent of their Ottoman overlords. The Mamluks went on to hold formal power over most of Iraq (1747–831) and were preferred by most Iraqis, especially in Baghdad, because they suppressed tribal revolts, restored order, introduced a programme of modernization and transformed the region's crippling economy and under-achieving agricultural sphere.

In Tom Nieuwenhuis' study of the Mamluk period in Iraq he brings to light a number of important details about the political landscape of the time. Mamluk government can be characterized by two key *diwans* (executive administrative councils) that served as the administrative nucleus of the state. The first, the administrative *diwan*, was ostensibly controlled by the Mamluks, but the second, the consultative *diwan*, was made up of a much broader array of citizens including religious, tribal and military representatives. It served as an advisory council, playing a significant role in both deliberating over the key issues and informing the officials of the administrative *diwan*. In addition, even a lowly clerk of the consultative *diwan* could, in theory, and with the *pasha's* blessing, ascend the hierarchy to become a *pasha* himself, as was the case of Ali Pasha (1762–4) who was from a humble Persian background (Nieuwenhuis 1982: 15, 28). Outside of the official coterie in Baghdad, traditional Shia centres

such as Najaf and Karbala, and Kurdish and Turkomen centres like Kirkuk and Mosul not only enjoyed religious and political freedom but the elite of these towns came to wield significant influence. This is particularly true of the Shia clergy whose loyal following meant that the local *pasha* could rarely implement policy without first consulting with the seminaries and gaining their approval. The Shia elite became so powerful in the holy city of Najaf that, in 1815, they rebelled against their governor and declared themselves independent. Although this did not last long, Najaf's independence also saw the formation of two political parties, *zurqurt* (the poor) and *shumurd* (the rich). The former, led by Abbas Al-Haddad, undertook a number of important public works projects including important irrigation and agricultural projects and the fortification of the town (Nieuwenhuis 1982: 31–2).

The rule of the Mamluks came to an abrupt end in the middle of the nineteenth century when, in reaction to a series of important regional and global events, including the rising power of European nation-states, the Ottomans sought to consolidate their authority over centres like Iraq. In 1831 they captured the Mamluk *pashas* of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul and the three provinces returned to Ottoman control (Tripp 2007 [2000]: 14). Despite their increased control over regions such as Iraq, the Ottomans also enacted a number of significant democratic changes. Its fledgling press sector began to expand following the legalization of printing in both Turkish and Arabic and the opening of the first Turkish printing press in 1727 (Kinross 2003 [1977]: 364, Lewis 1961: 50).

In Iraq, the progressive Ottoman *Vali* (Governor), Midhat Pasha, took the post of Baghdad in 1869 and among his many achievements was the founding of the weekly newspaper, *Al-Zawra* ('the Curved [City]', a popular soubriquet for Baghdad) (Ayalon 1995: 25). In the 1870s journalists across the Ottoman Empire were responsible for stimulating much of the discussion surrounding controversial ideas like constitutionalism and the legitimate rights of the everyday man (Mardin 1969: 276). For Toby Dodge, this collection of reforms implemented by the Ottomans clearly 'point towards a much more balanced, integrated and

negotiated relationship between state and society in Ottoman Iraq than the discourse of Oriental Despotism allows' (Dodge 2005 [2003]: 50).

Such changes also fostered a rich scholarly scene across the Ottoman Empire in which various Muslim intellectuals – both men and women – began to engage with the contemporary political ideas and events of Europe, including the emergence of representative democracy (Gandolfo 2011). Many of these Muslim intellectuals were not only inspired by events in Europe, but were also deeply critical of their own governments and saw no direct contradiction between the fundamentals of Islam and the practice of modern representative democracy. As just one example, the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh writing in the second half of the nineteenth century argued that Muslims did not so much need to look to Western civilization for democratic inspiration, as they did to the doctrine of Islam itself. He claimed that

If despotism is not Islamic, then all means, excuses and devices that lead to despotism are themselves not Islamic. If freedom, justice, equality and human rights are Islamic, then all means and devices that lead to liberty, justice, equality, fraternity, and human rights are themselves Islamically valid. (Khatab and Bouma 2007: 49)

The increasingly democratic impetus in the work of various Muslim intellectuals and the expansion and liberalization of the press sector converged to form another significant development in this era of Ottoman politics, namely the First Constitutional Period of the late 1870s. Here, the Ottomans requested the various provincial councils scattered across the empire elect representatives who would form a national parliament. This parliament was then given the task of writing the Ottoman constitution and an electoral law that was to be utilized in not only guaranteeing the rights of the citizen but in ensuring an ongoing process of empire-wide elections that would enable a modern representative democracy to emerge. Specifically, the constitution stipulated that the Ottoman Empire should be governed by a *Heyet-I Ayan* (nominated senate) and a *Heyet-I Mebusan* (elected chamber of deputies) (Kayali 1995: 267).

This climate of reform led to what has come to be called the ‘Young Turk’ movement which successfully challenged the Ottoman Empire in 1908 and set about re-establishing constitutional government and restoring measures of autonomy to the various national-cultural entities within their governance (Shmuelewitz 2004: 28). They also went on to establish secular schools and liberalized the publications sector. In Iraq, this included not only papers in support of the ruling party in Istanbul such as *Al-Zawra*, but also opposition papers including *Bayn Al-Nahraysn* (‘Mesopotamia’) (Ayalon 1995: 66). Iraqis also had access to newspapers from Syria and Lebanon as well as those from Istanbul, including anti-Young Turk papers like *Volkan* (‘Volcano’) and Zionist papers published by the Jewish community such as the weekly *Hamevasser* (‘Herald’) (Shmuelewitz 2004). Many of these newspapers and magazines of the Young Turk period were filled with long editorials praising the new era of tolerance and press freedom.

The Young Turk movement also brought with it another very significant development in terms of the unfolding story of democracy in Iraq. In 1908, the Young Turks orchestrated provincial elections in which citizens across the empire, including those in Iraq, were asked to vote for their chosen representative to the Ottoman Chamber of Representatives. In the lead-up to the polls, the empire was divided into electorates in which there was one representative for every 50,000 male citizens. Enfranchisement extended to all men over the age of 25 who paid taxes and all reports indicate that the election was free and fair with only minimal complaints of coercion or fraud (Kayali 1995: 269–71). The significance and legacy of this election are clear in that they

provided precedents and standards that are yet to be equalled in the Middle East and many other parts of the world; introduced the Middle Easterners to fundamental norms of political participation and mobilization; and defined the main contours of political contestation that have endured long after the end of the empire. (Kayali 1995: 265)

This brought with it a strong augmentation of Iraq's culture of public debate and criticism as is best evidenced by the atmosphere surrounding Iraq's 1912 election. By all accounts, these elections were even better than the ones of 1908; a resounding success for democracy, they were 'outstanding elections' that involved 'spirited contestation' and had 'significant implications' for the political landscape of the Ottoman empire (Kayali 1995: 273). This is especially true because they were very fiercely contested, particularly in highly politicized regions like Syria and Lebanon which saw a vast array of candidates engaged in a series of rich and complex policy debates (Khalidi 1984). The foremost success of these elections was their enormous contribution to the public sphere of the region in which an engagement with politics became central to the lives and needs of many normal citizens. As Hasan Kayali summarizes, Electioneering occurred both on public platforms and in the press. Campaigning went beyond the confines of clubs and halls to large mass rallies. The press, both in the capital and in the provinces, not only covered the campaign but became an integral part of it by contributing to the political agenda. The number of petitions from individuals and local groups arriving in various government agencies increased dramatically. (Kayali 1995: 273)

What is also particularly interesting about the 1912 elections is their Islamic dimension. Rising trends towards secularism amongst the literate classes of the Ottoman Empire prompted religious groups to demand that political parties make clear their theological position. Far from stifling debate, this meant that the negotiation between modern representative democracy and traditional Islamic principles once again came to the fore. For many political factions Islamic symbols and motifs as well as religious rhetoric formed a central pillar of their election campaigns. This brought another unintended consequence, the votes of the Arab provinces – whose inhabitants were generally less educated and less secular than those in Anatolia – became of central importance to political parties who had hitherto campaigned mostly to the Ottoman elite. This meant that political parties increasingly adapted their campaigns and policy to the needs and beliefs of the Arab regions and saw no conflict between Arab political culture or Islamic doctrine and democracy

(Kayali 1995: 273). While it is important not to overstate the role that these elections, newspapers and political parties played in developing a public sphere in the Ottoman-controlled regions which later became the nation of Iraq, they nonetheless indicate just how far back discourse and debate on democratic issues were evident across the region. In this way, Ottoman Iraq played a fundamental role in establishing and informing the nascent civil movements that, as we shall see in the following chapter, came to play such a crucial, diverse and oppositional role in twentieth century Iraqi politics.

## **Conclusion**

What is evident here is that from the very earliest days of Islam the religion contained a democratic ethos that sought to bring a more equitable and egalitarian system of governance to the people. These sentiments were brought into Iraq and fostered under the various Islamic empires that ruled over it. Beyond the fact that the highest echelons of the state waxed and waned in their commitment to the Islamic doctrines and to democracy, lies the even more important – and more Islamic – legacy of the *ulama* who provide for us important insights into the ongoing struggle of the *ummah* towards democracy. Later, Iraq's democracy continued to flourish with the holding of free and fair elections, and the development of various Iraqi newspapers and political parties that continued to agitate towards greater diversity, debate and discourse. Islam, in Iraq as much as anywhere else, is far from antithetical to democracy and should not be viewed either now or in the past as a determining cause for any failures in Iraqi politics. Instead, Islam must be acknowledged for having preserved and spread both the ethic and practice of democracy perhaps further and wider than had heretofore been the case.

What is most significant about Iraq's Islamic democratic history is that this heritage remains so much a part of the socio-political landscape of Iraq today. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the democratic history of Islamic Iraq has been central to the nation's fledgling democracy as a wide collection of senior Islamic scholars and clergymen called upon the faithful to vote, to campaign, to protest, and generally to become more involved in politics. Islam is a key part of Iraq's constitution with Article 2 not only stating that 'Islam is the official religion of the State

and is a foundational source of legislation' but also that no law may be enacted which contradicts 'the established provisions of Islam' nor the 'principles of democracy', including religious freedom (*The Constitution of Iraq 2010* [2005]: 308). It is by no means the case that Iraq is emerging from a history dominated by a despotic Islam that fostered oppression but instead that, both historically and today, Islam and democracy can be seen to hold key virtues and practices in common. To be a Muslim is to bring you no closer, or take you no further away, from being a democrat.