The historiography of present-day Iraq is fraught with perils, most of them of the paradigmatic kind. No country in the Arab Middle East has been viewed with such myopic subjectivity nor with such condescension either by scholars or laymen alike. For this reason, Charles Tripp’s sober yet well-written book on Iraq should be welcomed as a hopeful sign that there is an audience out there that has grown tired of Saddam-obsessed pulp and is ready for a serious study of the country’s past and present, if not of its future. Professor Tripp’s book is a significant contribution to the field, and should be read by all those interested in the making of a pivotal Arab nation-state, its identity, politics and relations with the outside world. Despite its unrelenting political focus, this is a very good standard history of Iraq, not least because the author makes comprehensible Iraq’s complex history as well as its purportedly opaque state and society in a mere 284 pages.

Tripp’s thesis is clearly stated at the beginning of the book. His is a study of the origins and development of the Iraqi state, and the “history of the strategies of cooperation, subversion and resistance adopted by various Iraqis trying to come to terms with the force the state represented [as well as] the history of the ways the state transformed those who tried to use it”. (p. 1) Throughout, the author stresses the competing “narratives” of different state actors, the constant redefinition of “fixed” social categories such as the tribes, and the nature of authority in royalist and republican Iraq. He believes that the Iraqi state was, and still is, characterized by three notable features. The first is the enduring nature of patrimonialism, and the persistence of personal networks throughout Iraqi history. The second is the “economic foundations of Iraq”, by which the author means the vast oil revenues that both allowed for the state’s autonomy from society, and its capacity to reorder patrimonial relationships to suit the purposes of the class in power. Finally, whether in the era of the monarchy or under the Ba’th regime, Iraq’s governments have been conspicuous for their reliance on violent means both to grab power and to keep it.

The author suggests that because the new country of Iraq possessed an often unruly mix of ethnicities, confessions and groups, both the British mandatory power and the embryonic elite of ex-Sharifian officers, Ottoman notable families, select Mid-Euphrates shaykhs and “secular” reformers were drawn to a style of government that best conformed to their political traditions. This chiefly centred around the reordering of the country on the basis of authoritarian standards and peremptory principle. Autocratic
traditions were instilled early. Because the British were wary of Shī'ah populism, so vividly illustrated by the insurrection of 1922, they turned to the kind of people they could do business with. These were Sunnī ex-Sharifian officers who had fought with Fayṣal ibn al-Husayn, ex-Ottoman landed gentry in the towns, and the favoured tribal shayikhs in the Shī'ī countryside who all felt they best exemplified the new state-in-the making because of their privileged backgrounds, access to the new ruler or command of military issues. The rest of the Shī'ah and the majority of the Kurds, under-represented in the new state despite their heavy numbers, were from the very beginning kept at an arm’s length. Notwithstanding the many movements of collective resistance and street protest that were to bring Iraqis from all groups and classes together in coups d’état and insurrections throughout Iraqi history, the Shī’ah and the Kurds have been largely absent from the political picture. According to Tripp, the state has largely drawn its representatives from the narrow, clannish cliques that dominate the Sunnī heartland, and continue to buttress the regime in power even today.

The theme of closed societies and conspiratorial cliques is so thoroughly reiterated in the book that the question poses itself: Why did Iraqi strongmen and dictators persist in relying on unrepresentative networks and groups to the detriment of broader, and certainly more inclusive strategies? Why was the army seen as the saviour of failed regimes, when the army brought down more governments than it saved? Why was coercion considered the only path to power? Tripp’s book is largely silent on these issues. While the author does discuss some notable instances of civilians taking over government, as with the late Prime Minister ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Bazzāz’s brief interlude in the late sixties, his work is so thoroughly focused on the dizzying sequence of royalist and republican regimes closely following on each other that he fails to take a stab at anything remotely deviating from his political focus. After an engrossing first section on the making of modern-day Iraq under Fayṣal I, the rest of the book essentially functions as a prologue for the coming of ʿaddām Husayn’s regime; fully one-third of the book is devoted to him, and the disastrous wars that accompanied his tenure in power.

Moreover, there are a number of unresolved issues and questions in Tripp’s study that require further definition. One is the classic argument often posited by modernization theorists that Third World states lack a “national” core. Forging closely to the thesis of Iraq’s “uniqueness” (a singularly ahistorical explanation greatly favoured by policy analysts with little comparative perspective), Tripp sees Iraqi state formation as a bankrupt experiment, preventing the assimilation and integration of “the multiple histories of Iraqis” into “a single narrative of state power”. While it is true that state ideology focused on a particularist vision of Sunnī ʿArab group identity
to the detriment of other communities’ distinctive affiliations, national or otherwise, Tripp’s argument fails to take into account the astonishing endurance of the Iraqi state, especially in the sanctions era. Besieged and attacked at every turn, Iraq is still in existence as more or less a unitary state, albeit one held in thrall to Western interventionism. Perhaps the only reason that the country is seen as the ultimate failed state is because, in the wake of the Gulf war, it has become fashionable to see the country as an imminent Yugoslavia, ready to break apart the minute that central authority erodes. This anticipated break-up may be illusory, and the country and its people may yet surprise its detractors!

Second, there is reluctance about the term, “Iraq” itself. On page 8, Tripp writes a short paragraph on the fluid parameters of historical Iraq, relying on the descriptions of Arab/Islamic geographers (who regularly used the term al-'Irāq), only to revert to the anachronistic term of “Mesopotamia” when discussing the pre-Mandate era. Since the term, “Mesopotamia” is of Greek origin and has no echo in the local literature of the region, the reader is entitled to ask what makes “Mesopotamia” any more authentic than “Iraq”, and why is a European loan-word considered more fitting than one that has existed in the region for millennia. There is too much emphasis on political correctness here; any examination, however superficial, of the pre-modern historiography of Iraq will unearth dozens of references to the term al-'Irāq by journeying scholars or government officials. While it is undoubtedly correct to note that the term itself does not in any way reflect a politicized reality, it nonetheless connotes an association with home, however limited or circumscribed that notion was in pre-modern Iraq. It therefore possesses a flavour and an immediacy that merits recognition, if only *en passant*, of the historical continuum that ties the present-day Iraq to its illustrious past.

Hala Fattah

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*A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism* by Klaus K. Klostermaier is the third book in the series on the major religions of the world published by Onworld, Oxford, the first being on Christianity and the second on Judaism. The author is a University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Manitoba in Canada and a Fellow of the...