

Ishraqat, Part I. **Flagging a New Iraq: Failure of a National Symbol.**

By Babak Rahimi



The verdict is out. “It’s ugly!” my Iraqi friend tells me. “The new flag seems divided into two parts, a flag with a split personality. It can almost constitute two separate flags if you split it in half.” He adds, “The colors are also pretty dull. Baby blue and white? Keep the red, black and green!”

In the streets of Baghdad, the majority of Iraqis received the proposed flag with a similar line of skepticism. “I don’t like the new one,” said Dhia Assi, a bakery owner. “The old one used to make me feel revolutionary. I feel this one belongs to another country.”¹ Muthana Kahlil, a supermarket owner in Saddoun, a commercial center in Baghdad, said, “The flags of other Arab countries are red and green and black. Why did they put in these colors that are the same as Israel? Why was the public opinion not consulted?”²

In several neighborhoods in Baghdad, residents displayed strong negative reactions to the flag, many objecting that the light blue stripes were reminiscent of the Israeli flag. The Website of an Iraqi dissident group, www.albasrah.net, for instance, showed a picture of the Israeli flag transforming into the new Iraqi one, with underneath the flag reading, “Nile-Euphrates”. Objections were also voiced with regard to the removal of the phrase, “Allah Akbar” (God is Great), which was seen as the defilement of a sacred

¹ “Flap over New Iraq Flag,” <http://cnm.worldnews>, 5/11/2004.

² “Iraqis Say Council-Approved National Flag Won’t Fly,” <http://www.washingtonpost.com>, 4/24, 2004.

symbol. Likewise, hundreds of university students demonstrated in Mosul, northern Iraq, and other protesters burnt the new banner in places like Najaf and Fallujah, the city at the heart of Iraq's insurgency.³ In much dismay of U.S. and the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), the flag has met with widespread public disapproval, so much that its use as a national symbol of a future democratic Iraq remains highly doubtful.

In broad terms, to many Iraqis the new fluttering national icon heralds a new era of subjection, a sign of perpetual U.S. domination in which even the most sacred sign of a nation, its flag, manifests a strange and foreign design. While reflecting the struggle that exists in the country ahead of the supposed transfer of power at the end of June, the "blue flag" reminds many Iraqis of deepening crisis of political legitimacy which appears to characterize the future of the country for years to come. In a symbolic way, however, the new banner also highlights a historical struggle for national selfhood that now, more than ever, appears to face an unsettled future.

Ventures of the Iraqi Flag: a (brief) history

The original flag of Iraq was adopted in 1921. Black-white-green horizontal tricolor, aligned with a red trapezoid extending from the side and two stars on the triangle. The first flag represented the creation of the Arab kingdom that remained under British control until 1932. On 14 July 1958 the Faisal dynasty was deposed, which led to the proclamation of a republic. Designed in form of a black-white-green vertical tricolor, the second flag was devised with a white strip in the middle and a red eight-pointed star along with a yellow circle in its center. In an attempt to depict ancient Mesopotamian history, the sun-like symbol represented ancient Babylon, making reference to the emblem of the Babylonian god Shamash.⁴

The third flag was adopted after toppling of the Qassim regime in 1963. Designed in form of three stripes of red, white and black, including three green stars on the white strip, the flag and its three green stars originally signaled the proposed union of Iraq with

³ Simon Robinson, "What's Really Fueling the Fire? How a stream of resentment is turning Iraqis against the U.S.," *Time*, 6/ 10/ 2004, p. 51.

⁴ See E. M. C. Barraclough and W.G. Crampton, *Flags of the World*, p. 173

the two Arab nations of Egypt and Syria, which also had flags with stars in the middle. The third flag appeared when the new regime began an extensive expansion of national ideology and new cultural policy in order to bolster a sense of pan-Arab patriotism after the 1967 Six Day War against Israel and while vying for military hegemony in the region against the Shah of Iran.⁵ More importantly, the flag further displayed the commitment for the creation of a secular pan-Arab nationhood, after the Ottomans (symbolically) ended Turkish rule over the Arabs on October 3, 1918. The third flag, though, continued to be the symbol of the Iraqi nation, authorized by the Ba'ath Socialist Party, until the Persian Gulf War in January 4, 1991.

The fourth version was made with a minor change to the 1963 flag, as it added the words of "Allah Akbar" between the stars. This was in a way a major development in the design of the national logo since the three stars that represented the Ba'ath nationalist motto of "Wihda, Hurriyah, Ishtirakia" (Unity, Freedom, Socialism) were now fused with one of Islam's most basic declaration of faith.⁶ Ostensibly, the reason for the added religious symbol was to gain support from Muslims around the globe in the period that immediately preceded the Persian Gulf War.

The announcement of the most recent flag by the IGC on 26 April 2004 marks the fifth attempt to form a new national symbol; this time however the attempt was to abandon more than half a century of pan-Arab nationalism. In a radical shift away from the previous four designs, the new flag dumps the red-and-black colors for two blue horizontal stripes along the bottom and a yellow one sandwiched between them. As it appears, above the three stripes is white and in the middle a blue crescent. The blue stripes represent the Tigris and Euphrates (by extension Shi'i and Sunni Arabs) on a field of pure white, representing "peace, reconciliation and a new era".⁷ Yellow signifies the Kurdish minority. The blue crescent represents Islam, hence, no longer bearing the words of "Allah Akbar". Two days after the announcement, the pale blue color was considerably darkened. This was done in order to change the original color of the crescent and stripes which appeared identical to the dominant color in the flag of Israel.

⁵ B. Amatzia, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'athist Iraq*, p. 13.

⁶ It should be noted that the three-star flag identified pan-Arab nationalism, sharing symbolic features held in common with flags of Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Syria.

⁷ "New Iraq flag: Designer speaks out," <http://www.com/2004/World/meast/04/29/iraq.flag.designer,4/29/2004>.

In the respect to such a turbulent history, why does the adoption of new flags matter so much? What is so important about flags that lead individuals to strong emotions to oppose or uphold them throughout history? Although these questions require thorough analysis, at this point it is important to describe the authority of symbols in the production of national identity and political power.

The Political Aesthetics of Symbols

When in 1861 Italy began its phase of unification, Massimo d'Azeglio, the former prime minister of Piedmont, pointed out the following: "we have made Italy: now we have to make Italians." What d'Azeglio suggests here is that the formation of a state does not automatically and necessarily entail the creation of a nation, and that in order to unify a country, individuals need to also *form* a national consciousness which would allow them to feel members of a nation, as "Italians".

Symbols play an integral role in the formation of nations since they arouse feelings of collective incorporation and a community of feeling in which persons of all ages are meant to feel themselves as members of a greater collectivity. Through the medium of dress, uniforms, myth, song and ritual symbols, collective identity is shaped and it enters the domain of everyday life. This is so as symbols assume a prominent role when rules of conduct and common affiliation to symbols help individuals become members of a nation.

The significance of flags and anthems in this respect is that they can bring together individual subjectivities by developing new tastes and emotions, habits and ideals, aiming to express the deepest aspiration and ideologies of a people. In a sense, flags help to shape new motivations in the formation of national consciousness. In his famous book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson explains the importance of the national anthem as the following: "No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance. Singing the Marseillaise, Waltzing Matilda, and Indonesia Raya provides occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined

community.”⁸ In other words, anthems and flags are in the business of constructing emotional attachments and imaginary relations that create a spirit of community, a sort of love for the nation.

What is crucial, though, is the fact that collective identity must be primarily expressed through symbolic guises. A set of national symbols like flags, which so colorfully claim to represent a people, are the best representative of such semblance, since they embody the ideals and the pivotal values of a nation; expressing political power and depicting collective identity.

The Symbolic Pacification of A Nation

But prior to constructing attachments that create a new national consciousness for an “imagined community”, the post-Saddam Iraq first requires a legitimate government that can officially authorize the use of such symbols. This is crucial since it is in the formation of an integrated and, more importantly, an *autonomous* state that the emergence of a new imaginary collective body could possibly be realized; that is, a collectivity that has indeed attained a sense of democratic patriotism.

Come June 30th the handover of sovereignty in form of an UN-picked interim government will not be a finalized event, but a gradual process towards self-rule. For the most part, the new government will be supervised and, despite claims of an “advisory status”, controlled by the U.S.-led coalition without a precise date of complete handover of authority. In other terms, Iraqis will not assume authority until-- as we are told-- security is established in the country.

However, with the incessant rise of insurgency and the increasing mobilization of Shi‘i and Sunni (domestic and foreign) forces, the creation of an autonomous interim government, with the *full* responsibility to set up elections and bureaucratic apparatus to govern the country (in particular the military) by next January, appears an interminable work-in-progress. In view of an Iraq mired in violence and volatile sectarian and political groupings, the realization of an autonomous state, elected and held accountable by the

⁸ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 145.

Iraqis, looks more like a perpetual (gradual) preparation for an interim government than an actual consolidation of a democratic state.

The overhaul of the national icon raises some other serious problems. To begin with, the UK-based designer of the flag, Rifat al-Chadirchi, has family ties with one of the members of the IGC. This surely underlines the problem of legitimacy for the new banner, as charges of nepotism brood over the veiling of the new flag--even if it is intended to be a temporary replacement for the old one. But more troubling is the fact that Mr. Rifat al-Chardirchi has lived in exile since 1980. How are we, then, to assume that the designer of the nation's most sacred icon is truly acquainted with Iraq and its more than twenty years of war and suffering? As an Iraqi-in-exile, was he indeed able to depict the desires, hopes and ideals of everyday Iraqis in his new flag, apparently made and designed in the U.K.? There is surely a serious disparity between the inventor and the nation he is attempting to depict in this new flag.

In so far as the aesthetics of the design are concerned, the new flag lacks coherence and symmetry. At first, its minimalist strokes manifest abstract motifs that are simply dull and unappealing. But also in its simplicity of form, as my Iraqi friend correctly points out, the flag appears to be divided into two, separate but combined, divided but joined, as though depicting a nation split into two identities. But what really underlines the flag's unattractive façade, as it has been pointed out by number of Iraqis, is its rigidity in form, austerity in shape, and, most troubling, choice of color.

Whilst it may appear as a given, there is simply no relationship between Iraq's cultural history and the predominant color of blue found in the flag. In this regard, the use of blue for the stripes (and the crescent which I will discuss accordingly) underlines a major problem of symbolic significance. From one point angle, it appears that the color merely symbolizes the two rivers. But then one could also object to whether it represents a mere geographical location or a spectrum of the Iraqi society, since by extension it supposedly signifies Iraq's Arabs as the basin of the country's heartland. But it is unclear how effectively the blue strips actually represent both the two rivers and the diverse Arab population of Iraq at the same time. It would have been better, of course, if Mr. al-Chadirchi made use of the color to symbolize one theme for a logo at a time, that is:

either geographical or religious identity. Otherwise, in contrast to its apparent simplicity, the use of colors is complicated and confusing.

From another perspective, the color used in the banner also fails to use a common symbol for Islam. The problem here is that blue has never played a predominant role as a sacred symbol in Islamic history. The only occasion in which blue stands for some sort of sacred significance in the Islamic world is with regard to the intricate tile mosaic work of the Persianite mosques (visible mostly in the dome structure) that primarily expanded under the Timurid and the Safavid dynasties in the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.⁹ In that sense, the architectural use of blue had to do mainly with the incorporation of pre-Islamic Zoroastrian religious symbols into Islamic sacred space, where the color blue apparently functioned as a sort of magical color to repel evil—similar to the gargoyles in medieval cathedrals.

The most sacred color in Islam is green, which is believed to have been the favorite of the Prophet. Black represents mourning (or at times uprising) and red martyrdom, colors mostly favored by the Shi'is. But nowhere do we see these colors used in the new flag. Why? It appears as though the UK-based Iraqi designer wanted to symbolically dress up an (over) optimistic, calm, happy, peaceful post-Saddam Iraq, as if a complete break from the past can be easily achieved by a placid blue and white colorful design.

When considering the color blue, one becomes immediately aware of a feeling of serenity and peace, a sort of sensation one gets looking at a calm sea or a cloudless sky. Blue signifies tranquility and composure. But it also underscores an attempt to symbolically pacify a nation that currently experiences turmoil and upheaval. The “blue flag” invites us to the visual imagery of a nation that pretends to accommodate diverse religious and ethnic identities, calmly coexisting in peace and harmony. This, of course, stands sharply in contrast to the Ba'athist-style-flag that represents Arab history as blood and sacrifice, impressing on us a sensation of rebellion and confrontation, aggression and revolution.

What is most dismaying about this flag is not that it merely fails to produce an authentic portrayal of a presumed Iraqi identity. Rather it neglects to make any reference

⁹ Perhaps the most famous of these forms of sacred architecture is the Blue Mosque (Masjid-i Muzaffariyah) in Tabriz, 1465, which is decorated with intricate tile mosaic with monumental inscriptions in squared Kufic Arabic scripts.

to a shared history and a common tradition, to which Iraqis can relate and accordingly consider sacred in terms of a national symbol. The U.S. sanctioned leadership has committed the error of mistakenly authorizing a simplified set of symbolism; applying austere signs which the ordinary Iraqis fail to identify as a meaningful symbolic representation of their homeland. It would have been wiser if the colors were drawn upon from the country's cultural past in order to encourage a sense of trust and continuity of national identity in the post-Saddam Iraq. All in all, the shade of blue is not one of the colors associated with the fertile-crescent that would stir reverence and a sense of patriotism among Iraqis.

Even more problematic, however, is the use of colorful strips in an attempt to represent religious and ethnic affiliation. Though it may be true that the color yellow represents the Kurdish ethnic identity, taking its color from the yellow star on the flag of Kurdistan, the concatenation of the two colors, next to a white field, symbolically reinforces and overemphasizes ethnic and religious factionalism. By this I mean that, though historically it remains the case that ethnic and religious factionalism has played a crucial role in the making of Iraq, the new flag reconfirms these relations on more fragmentary terms through the use of colorful strips. In the context of this faction symbolism, this clean-cut and dressed up design, accordingly, fails to represent other ethnic and religious minorities, like the Caldonian Catholics, who form an integral part of the post-Saddam Iraq. This further reveals the problem that the new flag does not truly represent the entire Iraqi ethnic and religious cultures as a heterogeneous collectivity.

Then there is the crescent. Although often associated with the Islamic faith, early Muslims never used the emblem to represent their faith. In fact, the crescent has nothing to do with the early Islamic faith, as the religion originally spread across the Mediterranean basin from the eighth to the tenth century. The crescent possibly originates as a symbol of Constantinople that dates from the Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It appears as though the emblem was taken over by the Turks with the capture of Constantinople (present day Istanbul) in 1453 in an attempt to celebrate the Ottoman triumph over the Christian forces.¹⁰ One could, of course, reasonably argue whether the origins of the crescent weigh any pertinence to the way Muslims identify

¹⁰ See E.M.C. Barraclough and W.G. Crampton (ed), *Flags of the World*, pp.19-20.

with the emblem in present time. However, one can also question the reason why the emblem was used as the religious symbol of Iraq in the first place. If Mr. al-Chadirchi wished to use a religious symbol for his new flag, then, what was wrong with “Allah Akbar”? Why did he need to opt for the crescent?

It is such misguided attempts to adopt a national flag that seem most bizarre to the Iraqi eyes. These are what most confuse and dismay them, leading them to reject the new design as a result.

The ultimate irony here, is that the proliferation of new symbols of sovereignty sanctioned by the IGC, makes the Iraqis feel more unclear about the post-Saddam national identity, and hence they also feel a growing distrust of their condition in a post-war era. What is at stake here is that there appears to be a huge gap between the new invented national symbols and the will of the Iraqis, their various ideas of freedom, their diverse visions of a future democratic Iraq. The truth is that the majority lack confidence that life will get better and that the purpose of the U.S.-led invasion, for the establishment of an autonomous Iraq with the consent of the people, will one day be realized.

Respectfully, symbols first require a clear vision of an imagined community in reference to a relatively stable and self-governing country. Accordingly, we need to know what it is about these invented symbols, their symbolic implication, that the Iraqi people would identify and find a longing to hold on to. What is this new Iraq, how *truly* autonomous is it, and why should the Iraqis hold on to it? Any attempt to symbolize a new Iraq at this stage of a long process of democratization is a naïve fantasy saturated with an overriding sense of optimism.

A new representative institution, therefore, first should be institutionalized before Iraqis (and Iraqis alone!) begin to flag a new national symbol, proclaiming a new democratic order in place of an autocratic one. The new design should reflect the values of a future parliament, elected and held accountable by Iraqis who have experienced years of suffering. And surely the future flag should not reflect the aesthetic taste of an Iraqi in exile, designing the national icon according to *his* vision of Iraq viewed from a comfortable upper-middle class setting in the U.K. In short, the Iraqi authority should

first wait for an elected government before creating new national symbols; anything else will appear illegitimate to the Iraqis.

It is by no means clear, however, if the new flag will be approved by the Iraqi parliament, yet to be institutionalized in the year to come. The fate of this “transitional” flag remains as uncertain as the realization of democracy in Iraq. In light of the presumed transfer of power at the end of June, the “blue flag” represents a nation increasingly looking insecure, fractured, divided and vague, perhaps a bit gloomy like the pale blue sky of a cold and disheartening winter day, as the American military continues to secure a long-term strategic foothold in the country. More importantly a failed Iraq could still prove a greater threat to world security than a failed national symbol. This makes it all the more essential to bring government into Iraqi hands, monitored and protected by the UN, and, above all, free from the U.S. military domination.

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