Violent communication in Iraq: intended and unintended consequences

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Two days in January 2014 witnessed acts of violence by insurgents across Iraq that cost the lives of over one hundred Iraqis, civilians, military personnel and militia members. On 14 January, a fuel tanker was detonated by a suicide bomber under a major road bridge at Saqlawiya, near Fallujah in northwest Iraq. The main road from Baghdad to the west was cut and two army tanks destroyed, killing a number of army personnel. The police station at Saqlawiyah was then attacked and captured by the insurgents, causing the deaths of some two dozen policemen and soldiers. Attempts by the Iraqi army to retake the police station failed and it was only after the insurgent forces withdrew towards Fallujah that it was reoccupied. The next day, however, saw a dramatic spread and escalation of the violence. In Shatub, a village near Baqubah in northeast Iraq, a bomb was detonated at the funeral of a member of one of the government-sponsored tribal militias drawn from the Sunni Arab population. Nearly twenty people were killed and almost as many were wounded. Across the country, in the northwest at the bridge of Ain al-Jahash, a series of
roadside bombs exploded killing numerous soldiers and civilians. Meanwhile at Ma’amil, a largely Shi‘i district in the east of Baghdad, gunmen killed seven lorry drivers, kidnapped two and set the lorries on fire. All in all, eight bombs exploded across the capital that day, mainly in Shi‘i districts of Baghdad, killing forty people and wounding more than twice that number. Shi‘i Iraqis were also targeted by a car bomb in Dujail, a town north of Baghdad, with at least three fatalities.¹

These events, terrible as they were, are not at all unusual in the violence and counter-violence that have marked the landscape of Iraq. They form part of a recognisable pattern of violence in Iraq since the US-led invasion and military occupation of the country in 2003. The scale of the violence has varied throughout this period, measured by the lives lost and the damage caused to infrastructure. Sometimes this has been due to variations in the capabilities of those organising the violence, both insurgent and government sponsored; sometimes it depends on the political context of opportunity, resentment and revenge exploited by all actors on the stage of Iraqi politics. Nevertheless, the patterns of violence, the rationales, as well as the aims and purposes of those using violence against the citizens, militias and armed forces of Iraq draw upon well-established repertoires. There are features and histories specific to the Iraqi context, as well as rhythms that are particular to the ways in which the passions and ambitions of Iraqi actors play themselves out. However, the use of violence in multiple registers, against a variety of targets and for a range of motives shares much in common with situations elsewhere. This suggests that it is important to reflect upon how violence is commonly perceived, both in Iraq and elsewhere, in order to establish the communicative logic of this seemingly most radical and terminal of human practices.²

Violence has often been characterised both by its practitioners and by those who have analysed its uses as a pre-eminently instrumental act. Indeed, one of its attractions as a method is that it is believed to have an immediate and dramatic capacity to redress or to respond effectively to imbalances of power. This has often blinded people to its long-term consequences but as wars, insurgencies and political struggles across the world demonstrate only too well, the instrumental aspect of violence has been to the fore. For
established power, it promises to bring order, to instil discipline, to ensure political quiescence and, even if not deployed but only suggested, its threat is seen as a guarantor of stability and guardian of the existing division of labour and resources. For insurgent power, by the same token, it can be seen as the principal means by which the existing order can be undermined, even overthrown, and through which a new balance of power can be created, altering the calculations of advantage within a particular arena. In short, violence takes on a pre-eminently realist image in the practice as well as the understanding of politics.

This has been reinforced for some by the metaphor of the weapon itself. Whether it is the image of Alexander the Great using his sword to cut through the Gordian Knot, or the dictum of Mao Zedong that ‘political power grows out of the barrel of a gun’, the idea is that violence not only produces realist solutions to intractable problems, but is central to the construction of power itself. In this respect, Mao and others have given an instrumental gloss to Carl von Clausewitz’s famous statement that ‘war is the continuation of politics [or policy] by other means’, even if von Clausewitz intended this more as a commentary on the complexity of the political and the dangers of taking a reductionist view of violence.

Appropriately enough, it was a former prime minister of Iraq, Fadhil al-Jamali, on trial for his life before the ‘People’s Court’ in September 1958 who drew attention to the fascination of violence for those who see themselves as decisive realists on the stage of politics. As part of his ironic commentary on what was in effect a military tribunal, where the Military Public Prosecutor ostentatiously wore his revolver on his hip, al-Jamali cited the lines of the 9th century Iraqi poet at the court of the Abbasid Caliphs, Abu Tammam (Habib bin Aws al-Ta’i): ‘The sword is a more trustworthy form of communication than books; in its cutting edge lies the boundary between seriousness and frivolity’.

Such metaphors, as well as being tokens of a realist approach to power, can also be euphemisms to hide or to overcome the moral scruples that violence inevitably evokes. In doing so, they nevertheless draw attention to the moral economy of violence, underlining the norms surrounding its use and its effects not only on the targets of violence, but also on the perpetrators. This means thinking of the place of violence in the imagination,
understanding how it may amplify but also transform the political, how it can conjure up images, intensifying the experience. In particular, it obliges us to think about the ways in which violence may be seen as appropriate or fitting to specific settings, geared to a variety of ends. In the nature of things, some of these will be largely assessed in utilitarian and instrumentalist ways. Others, however, will be symbolic in nature, where the violence is against people or against material structures that represent, or stand in for some larger imagined entity. This is the real target – a collectivity, a system of power, a set of ideas or values – and the violent act is specifically intended to resonate in the mind’s eye of the practitioners, of the potential and actual targets, as well as of the wider publics for whom the act has meaning. In this connection, it is therefore incumbent to think about the larger normative and political setting in which violence ‘makes sense’ when used by and against particular human and material targets.

It is for this reason that it is important to bring out the complicating consequences of the use of the seemingly unanswerable power of violence, to recognise the fact that its use sets in motion processes of enormous complexity and ambiguity. As the recent history of Iraq has made all too plain, violence may be met, or ‘answered’ by even greater violence, ensuring that there is no final outcome, but a chain of consequences of ever increasing brutality but also complexity. Its normative features, as well as its imaginative and cultural resonance, ensure transformative reverberations throughout the country that are unlikely to be stopped by, but may well be responded to by the further use of violence. The violent act is in this sense the beginning of a conversation whose end cannot be predicted. In thinking about violence in this way, it is possible to see it as a form of communicative action. It is born of political thinking, but violence also generates ideas relating to identity, justice, resistance, state and authority that go far beyond any specific political objectives that might be achieved through its use. Retaining the image of the conversation that violence introduces, one can ask whether there is a common grammar of political violence and, further, whether there is a communicative logic of violence that shapes the ways in which its use and its effects are conceived.
It is here that one returns to the case of Iraq to see firstly, whether the notion of violence as a form of communication helps to clarify the forms, the targets but also the pace of violence in the country. Secondly, and related to this, the case of Iraq may provide an opportunity to understand the ways in which the grammar of communicative violence is inflected by specific, local contextual ideas and concerns. This can in turn provide an opportunity to assess whether these are the factors that are likely to shape the moral economy of violence, rather than simply its perceived utility, whilst recognising the inevitable entanglement of the two. These are the themes to be explored here. Based on the premise that violence in Iraq is a communicative process grounded in the contentious politics of that country, it argues that there are three major ‘conversations’ taking place between different sets of interlocutors, pursued by a variety of means and with a series of effects, some intentional and others less so.

**About the State: power, control, direction**

Many of the main violent exchanges in Iraq have concerned the state, its reach, its authority and the principles as well as the people it represents, or should represent. It is an object of debate and dispute – the endpoint of many of the conversations – and, through its agencies, is both instrument and target of violence. It is also a creation of massive and violent military intervention by US-led forces when they invaded Iraq in 2003. From this process there emerged a reconstructed state under foreign military occupation and the conditions of widespread insurgency. It is not surprising therefore that the coercive aspects of the state have been the focus of considerable attention, expenditure and development. In the circumstances, extending and reinforcing the reach and coercive capacity of the state have been seen as vital precursors to the rebuilding of its infrastructure, the renewal of its oilfields and the establishment of its governmental institutions.

The governments first of Iyad Allawi, then of Ibrahim al-Jaafari and of Nuri al-Maliki presided over this process and were born of foreign military occupation. They came into the world amidst escalating violence between various sections of the Iraqi population and the forces of occupation and their Iraqi allies. Encouraged and assisted by the United
States, these were the governments charged with reasserting the power of the state, using coercion in the first instance against all who defied the process of state reconstruction. In this task, all the refurbished forces of the Iraqi state were pressed into service, proliferating among a number of agencies that included the regular armed forces, the Baghdad Brigade attached to the office of the prime minister, the forces of the ministry of the interior, as well as partisan and tribal militias and death squads that owed their existence to their powerful patrons in the executive. These forces were deployed to carry the state – and the violence of the state – into the lives of citizens across Iraq, with the promise of protection for those who subscribed to the new political order and retribution for those who defied it.9

Initially, and most ambitiously, once the US forces had suppressed the worst of the insurgency by the end of 2007, the prime minister, al-Maliki, used the more effective units of the Iraqi army to embark on a ‘reconquest of the provinces’. Thus, 2008 witnessed a campaign to impose central government control by force of arms first on Basra, then on Diyala Province, on Mosul and the northwest and finally on Sadr City in east Baghdad. This control was never total and has been continually contested, but it created sufficient impetus to lay the groundwork for the re-emergence of the state in areas from which it had been effectively absent for over five years, paving the way for some stability and predictability in the local environment.

Nevertheless, the violence of state agencies was not confined to these military campaigns. In their wake, the coercive aspects of state power reasserted themselves, with thousands taken into custody without trial, incarcerated in prisons run by the ministry of defence, the ministry of the interior and even by the office of the prime minister, as well as in the institutions formally run by the ministry of justice. Conditions in these places were rarely monitored and indeed some of the prisons were themselves secret, unknown to all save those who ran them and those who had the misfortune to find themselves within their walls, subject to regimes of abuse and violence that were familiar expressions of state power in Iraq.10 The occasional release of batches of prisoners was meant to signal not only the magnanimity of the state, but also its power, reminding people that they could easily be detained once more with as little explanation or due process.
As an accompaniment, state television channels would air public confessions of those accused of acts of violence, giving expression to the symbolic power of the state. It also reminded Iraqis – in an idiom long familiar to previous regimes in Iraq – that the state’s violence was justified to protect the population from the violence of others. The visible signs of mistreatment, even torture on the bodies of some of those who made these public confessions, and the doubts about the establishment of their guilt, only served to reinforce the message of the state’s capacity for violence. This was certainly something that was driven home by the large numbers of executions carried out by the state authorities – 129 in 2012, 151 in 2013 and 38 in the first three weeks of 2014. The latter spate of executions coincided with the unrest in Anbar province, the capture of Fallujah by insurgent forces and the continued bomb attacks on security forces and civilians throughout Iraq. The resolve and determination of the government were being asserted through the use of state violence, even though it was spectacularly failing to protect the citizens from the violence of the continuing insurgency.

Some might have questioned the government’s methods, but there was no denying the fact that it and the Iraqi people more generally were facing an active and ruthless insurgency during these years. This was the other side to the conversation. The idiom of violence was prominent in the repertoire of those who opposed the government. From the time of the invasion and the defeat of the army of Saddam Hussein’s Ba`thist state, there had been mounting attacks on the forces of occupation. Initially disorganised, fragmentary and coming from a variety of groupings - Ba`thist, nationalist and Islamist - the insurgents had focused on the foreign forces that occupied Iraq. They also increasingly used violence against all those Iraqis who seemed to be collaborating with the US and its allies. As the Iraqi armed forces and state institutions began to take shape under US guidance and supervision, they too became the targets of insurgent attack. They were seen as the instruments of foreign or infidel rule, but they also represented for many in the insurgency the unacceptable supremacy of the Shi`i community, backed by Iran. This became a constant theme of repeated attacks not only against government institutions, but also against members of the Shi`i community more generally.
Just as the state was building up its institutional networks for the organisation and delivery of violence, so too were the various branches of the insurgency, using and extending the social networks of community and local association. These facilitated the delivery of violence in two senses. Firstly, they provided the communities of trust that could be relied upon to carry out widespread attacks across the country, supplying the necessary infrastructure of diverse networks – some tribal, others ideological and others locational – that could exploit the abundance of arms and explosives in circulation in the country in the years after the fall of the old regime. Secondly, they also constituted ‘moral communities’ that could endorse and support the use of violence, overcoming any possible scruples since they shared a common loathing of those now identified as the fitting targets of just retribution.13

Such violence took many forms and played itself out as a series of performances in the roads and streets of Iraq’s towns and villages and, by association, in the theatre of Iraqi politics. Violence was used against state infrastructure, government institutions, and the efforts to reconstitute Iraq’s economy, private as well as public. Furthermore, sectors of the economy and apparently mundane professions would be targeted, leading to the murders of dozens of teachers, doctors, bakers, hairdressers, booksellers, café owners and others in an effort to disrupt the return of any kind of normality under the new political order. Those who used such forms of violence appeared determined to prevent the re-emergence of the kind of stable and secure social order that might underpin acceptance of the status quo.14 Unsettling and defying the government, even when targeting ordinary Iraqi citizens, was a way of undercutting the authority of that government since it seemed to impress on the population of the country the limited reach and capacity of the state itself.

The same could be said of the creation of no-go areas, a common strategy in insurgencies to underline the powerlessness of established power, fostering a sense of solidarity within a community by ensuring its isolation and the antagonism of the state authorities. This was a strategy carried out by diverse Islamist and nationalist insurgents particularly in Ramadi
and in Fallujah, both in 2004 and in 2014. It also came out of, spoke to and helped to reinforce a sense of beleaguered community – in this case the Sunni Arabs of northwest Iraq. They felt increasingly alienated from a government that appeared to be in the hands of al-Maliki and his associates, many of whom came from his own political organisation – al-Da`wa - and most of whom were from different Shi`i communities across the country.\footnote{15} The violence – reciprocated by the government agencies – thereby graphically illustrated the argument put forward by Salafi Islamists and Iraqi nationalists that Iraq was in the hands of a clique of Shi`i sectarians, backed by Iran.

In all of this, symbolic cruelties were used to reinforce these same messages: the alien nature of a government that embodied ‘the Other’ and the license which this now gave those prepared to use violence to uproot it and humiliate it and its supporters. Since millions of Iraqis have now voted for the parties that constitute the government in two general elections (2005 and 2010), this has vastly extended the numbers of potential targets, labelled as agents of foreign powers, adherents of foreign ideologies or apostate Muslims. The performative aspects of this insurgent violence have been as vivid and as well publicised as that carried out by the state itself. They have ensured that the victims and their deaths are under the public gaze, either in streets, squares or open spaces, or captured and broadcast on the internet. This latter practice has even produced a distinct aesthetic that is meant to draw attention both to the virtue of those practising violence and to the cruelty of the act itself.\footnote{16}

Such practices are intended by some to underline the incommensurable nature of the two sides to the ‘conversation’ and the gulf that separates them. However, the insurgency is by no means monolithic. It is comprised of various groupings, some of which may cooperate for ideological or pragmatic reasons, but all of which work to their own agendas. This has led to divergent views on the utility of violence, the purposes it should serve, its appropriate targets and therefore the forms it should take. In some cases, violence has clearly been seen as a means not of eradicating ‘the Other’, but rather of entering into a conversation with established power, forcing it to recognise those prepared to use violence. The immediate results were often catastrophic, given the imbalance of forces, but
recognition could and often did follow. It was this which began the process of recruiting and co-opting insurgents in 2005/6 and which resulted in the establishment of the militias grouped under the National Council for the Awakening of Iraq (sometimes known as the ‘Sons of Iraq’, the ‘Sahwah [awakening] Council’ or the ‘Anbar Awakening’).

Originally an American initiative, the formations were handed over to Iraqi government control after 2008, in an uneasy relationship of mutual mistrust that had disintegrated in some parts of Iraq by 2012/3. It was then that anti-government violence began to escalate in some of the areas hitherto controlled by these units, re-establishing the pattern of pressure and bargaining that had been so marked before.

The legacies of these violent conversations about state power and the authority of the government have been many. Most obviously, there has been the human cost: the loss of life of tens of thousands of Iraqi citizens, caught between the violence of both sides, or used in some fashion to stand in for and thus to die for what one side takes the other to represent. There have also been institutional legacies: the rapid build up of the Iraqi security forces, now standing at well over half a million men, as well as the sometimes less visible organisations of a re-established ‘shadow state’. These are the networks emanating from the various oligarchs at the heart of state power in Iraq that control the lives of millions of Iraqi citizens, implicating them in systems of patronage, and often violence, that stand behind the public institutions of the state. The effect of the violent conversation between the government and its enemies has been, equally, to deepen and extend the networks of trust that underpin the delivery of insurgent violence, equally implicating millions of Iraqis in systems of sedition that have set themselves up against those who command the state.

In addition, there are the less tangible legacies, important in framing the practices and narratives that surround the use and the justification of violence. Underlining the realism of the enterprise, violence becomes both a means of establishing the state in an instrumentalist sense, but is also a way of symbolising and ‘standing for’ the state. Violence therefore becomes the token of state seriousness and the determination of those who govern. By the same token, its often spectacular use is meant to underline the serious
and the commitment of those who are resisting established power. These complementary features inform general attitudes whereby violence is commonly regarded as both normal and fitting in an increasing variety of contexts and against ever widening categories of people. Violence in this sense comes to represent what power is about, as well as what it means to engage with and to challenge power. In such a context, the norms relating to its deployment will mainly be determined by the unforgiving criteria used to judge the categories of people against whom it is used.

**About community and identity: communal violence**

It is not only communication between the Iraqi government and the resistance organisations that has been marked by violence. Entangled with this, but also in some cases reinforcing it and certainly deepening the bitterness and amplifying its destructive power, have been the forms of communal violence in Iraq. Mainly, but not exclusively sectarian in nature, with Shi`i Muslims targeted by certain groups of Sunni Muslims because of their sectarian identity, and vice versa, the violence has also engulfed members of other communities in Iraq, such as the Christians, the Mandaeans, the Yezidis, the Kurds, Turcoman and Assyrians. Violence has fed upon inter-communal prejudice, in the sense that a whole community of Iraqis may be categorised as deserving the violence inflicted on its members. However, it is not merely a product of inter-communal hatred. The enmity has been fuelled in large part by the perception of the relationship of that community to power – state, foreign, insurgent – and this has in turn been reinforced and reproduced by the violence used by both insurgent and government forces.

The placing of bombs in markets in largely Shi`i quarters of Baghdad, or in other towns and villages inhabited by Shi`i Iraqis, especially in mixed areas, the attacks on Shi`i pilgrims and the abductions and assassinations of even nominally Shi`i Iraqis have been constant features of the past ten years, causing tens of thousands of casualties. But equally, violence by the security forces of the Iraqi state against ‘problem communities’, or ‘communities of sedition’ has led to the deaths of many Sunni Iraqis, especially in the northwest and northeast of Iraq, in Anbar and in Diyala. Strongly suspected police involvement in the abduction and murder of Sunni Arab inhabitants of villages in these areas, as well as south
of Mosul, has been compounded by incidents such as the shooting of over 50 demonstrators by an Iraqi army unit at a protest camp in Hawijah near Kirkuk in April 2013. Their deaths and the perception that violence of this kind was used against them not only because they were against the government, but also because they were Sunni Arabs protesting about discrimination against people such as themselves by a sectarian administration helped to intensify the communal blood-letting that then escalated throughout 2013.

Inevitably, violence aimed at any members of a given community, inspires thoughts of revenge and breeds counter-violence. It also creates the demand for measures to protect the community and to neutralise the dangers represented by other communities. In an urban landscape, as much as in a rural setting of mixed villages this can lend lethal significance to the geographies of security. Districts, hamlets and villages inhabited by members of another community become strategic liabilities for their neighbours and thus, regardless of how those inhabitants have been traditionally viewed, take on a new aspect as direct or indirect threats to their very existence. In this sense, the logic of violence and its strategic deployment between communities takes over, as it has with lethal effect in other divided societies, such as Bosnia, Lebanon, Syria and Ulster. So in Iraq, the devastation of Diyala, the division of Kirkuk and the ‘clearing’ of areas of Baghdad with the loss of hundreds of lives have been the outcome of this grimly familiar process.

The escalation of inter-communal fighting, and of intra-communal conflict in some circumstances, produced the armed formations that shaped the militia-dominated landscape of Iraq, openly until 2008/9 and in more disguised form thereafter. Simultaneously, it produced communal leaders, such as Muqtada al-Sadr, whose political ambitions were furthered by their apparent willingness to command the means of violence. This was due in part to their need to establish their credibility within a community that felt itself to be physically threatened. But it was also because the environment was such that the ability and willingness to use violence was taken as a token of serious intent, the means by which a leader was recognised as one of the chief players in the game of politics.
The nature of inter-communal violence encourages symbolic acts of various kinds, in which the site, form and nature of the violence itself takes on added meaning, intended as a powerful means of conveying messages of threat, loathing, contempt and humiliation. Thus, attacks on places of worship belonging to another religious community became familiar incidents in the escalating violence of Iraq’s sectarian conflicts. Most spectacularly, in February 2006 the great al-Askari mosque in Samarra – revered by the Shi`a as a key shrine associated with the Shi`i imams – was bombed. This triggered a wave of retaliatory attacks in which some three dozen Sunni mosques across Iraq were damaged or destroyed, in turn triggering reprisals against Shi`i mosques. In addition, over 1500 people were killed in the week that followed, unleashing inter-communal violence that amounted to civil war and that was to persist at this level of intensity for nearly two years.23

The legacies of this violence have been communal mistrust and the fracturing of Iraq spatially, as well as imaginatively. Indeed the continuing violence and its escalation in 2013/4 to levels not witnessed since 2007 is a vivid testimony to the ways in which its practice has entered into the lexicon of political practice in Iraq, normatively and strategically. During the past decade, violence has not simply perpetuated and intensified communal enmity, but has also brought with it structural advantages for some, opportunities for ambitions to be realised and for the entrepreneurs of communal violence to flourish. It has also seen the acknowledged and sometimes unacknowledged deployment of supposedly ethical arguments in favour of the use of violence against certain categories of Iraqi. This has been visible in the rationales used by some of the Sunni Islamist groups to justify the killing of other Muslims, especially members of the Shi`i community, which has been declared infidel and thus meriting death through a selective reading of *hadith* and *fiqh*.24 Similarly, in 2014 the warnings by prime minister al-Maliki to the population of Falluja (seized by a combination of Islamist and tribal insurgents, defying the Iraqi government) to expel the ‘terrorists’ from their city or face military bombardment by the Iraqi army sounded like a threat of collective punishment.25 These are the ideas about ‘the Other’ in Iraq that have leant new and violent meaning to what had hitherto been unremarkable social difference.
A further disturbing legacy has been the ways in which violence, its reach and its logistics have encouraged regional entanglements. Iraq has thus become a terrain of proxy conflicts where local Iraqi communities and organisations collaborate with outside forces to destroy a perceived ‘common enemy’ within the country itself. It is a pattern of behaviour common to civil wars and reinforces the view held by one community that the other is in the service of an outside power, a powerful distancing device that can license unspeakable violence. It feeds into mutual mistrust and can be used to justify such violence in the name of communal or indeed national defence. In this context violence presents itself as the most effective way of eliminating an immediate threat, suited to the urgency of the task, presenting a ‘realist’ grasp of necessary strategies, but also stigmatising the enemy by placing the community in question firmly in a narrative that designates it as fundamentally ‘un-Iraqi’. The enduring imaginative legacy of this for any future notion of Iraqi citizenship or of a common Iraqi political space is disturbing.

**About Wealth: seizing and guarding the spoils**

In such an environment, it is not surprising that violence can easily be seen as the best way of handling any number of political issues. One of the most prominent in post-2003 Iraq, and one that is intimately tied up both with questions surrounding the reach and control of the state, as well as with the communal division of political society, is the question of accountability. Beginning with the US-run CPA of 2003/4 and carrying on in a similar fashion in the years that followed, this has taken a number of forms. There has been the systematic evasion of accountability by those in positions of power for the appropriation of funds that nominally belong to the Iraqi people. In addition, ruthless competition has flourished in a setting where hidden forms of violence are embedded in the coercive force that sustains a certain order of property favouring those with political and military clout, as the forcible seizure of real estate and commercial enterprises has shown. Equally, it is evident in a patronage system where communal leaders seize and selectively redistribute to members of the community goods that should be theirs by right as citizens. None of
this could be achieved without the threat or the use of violence to maintain such systems in place.

The violence of free enterprise has shown itself in other ways as well. In the period when inter-communal violence had declined prior to 2011 many of the acts of violence were targeted at people who had no clear political role and were not obviously selected because of their sectarian identity. Sticky bombs and silencers became the means whereby individuals were eliminated or warned. Some of this violence may have been a symptom of continuing political conflicts, but some was due more to business rivalries and the determination to eliminate competition. In an environment where guns and explosives were freely available, where those skilled in using them were plentiful and cheap to hire, and where the security forces were preoccupied with insurgency, or could be persuaded through higher connections, or through bribery to look the other way, violence became a kind of currency in the emerging market of Iraqi business. In some cases, there was clearly a suspicion that these acts were indeed closely connected to the networks of political privilege, power and self-enrichment that had come to dominate the hollowed out public services in Iraq.28

In many respects, posts in the public service of the state, from that of minister down, had become gifts of those in power, entrenching a renewed patrimonialism that characterised the premierships of all occupants of the post since 2004. In these circumstances, the state provided not only the financial resources, but also the coercive means to ensure that the division of the spoils should not challenged by those outside the magic circle. Preventing proper scrutiny of such processes and appropriations has been a recurring theme of the violence witnessed over these years. The case of the Commission of Public Integrity (since named the Commission of Integrity – *hay’at al-nasahah*) illustrates well this intertwining of misappropriated public funds and the use or threat of violence to prevent scrutiny. The Commission had been set up in 2004 and was incorporated into the Iraqi Constitution of 2005. It had been headed initially by Judge Hamza al-Radhi, an independent figure who took the commission’s task of impartial scrutiny seriously. However, he came up against an increasingly obstructive government under Nuri al-Maliki, accompanied by unattributable
death threats and an attack on his house that he suspected was organised by the state security forces. This led him to resign in 2007, to flee Iraq and to seek asylum in the US, while the Iraqi government, without apparent irony, threatened to sue him for corruption. His successor, Judge Rahim al-Uqaili did not last much longer. Having come up against the same obstructive and menacing forces as those faced by his predecessor, he too resigned in September 2011, citing official obstruction and the fact that his employees felt physically threatened when they tried to enter ministries to carry out investigations. His departure finally allowed the prime minister to appoint his own protégé to ensure that the Commission would henceforth serve rather than scrutinise government.

Similar campaigns of menace and physical violence have taken their toll of investigative journalists in Iraq. The country is one of the most dangerous in the world for journalists, both print and broadcast, with over 150 killed in the decade after 2003. Many of them died as a result of the insurgency and the widespread danger it has represented. But some have been intimidated or killed because of the ruthless determination of those who have appropriated public funds to avoid investigation. Such was the fate of the investigative radio broadcaster Hadi al-Mahdi who was killed in September 2011 almost certainly for his outspoken criticism of the government, his investigation of the widespread corruption by public figures and his denunciation of the betrayal of Iraq’s citizens by authorities who could not even ensure minimum public services. He had also been involved in the protests that had erupted in Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and other cities in 2011, inspired by the uprisings across the Arab world, but voicing their own criticisms of the failings of the Iraqi government. These efforts to hold the government to account were no more successful and were met with sustained and brutal force, where the agents of the security services were disguised as ‘concerned citizens’, wielding knives and iron bars to disperse the protestors.

The corruption that has been such a feature of the emerging parliamentary republic in Iraq has placed it near the bottom of the league of virtually any index of global corruption. As the examples above indicate, this scale of corruption is both an outcome of, but also drives the violence with which Iraqis are confronted whilst their country is being plundered. The two are intertwined since one prevents effective investigation of the other, whilst
establishing access to the resources that have become the prize. At the same time, ownership of the means of coercion evidently opens up opportunities for self-enrichment whether nominally in the service of the state, or ostensibly dedicated to one of the ideological groupings that make up the varied insurgency. As a report of 2012 of abuses in the prison service made startlingly clear, prison officers had worked out a disturbing tariff for the torture of detainees, with a higher pay off ensuring less pain. Indeed, regardless of the rulings of the judiciary, there was equally a tariff for the release of detainees, with those who failed to pay up being kept incarcerated, regardless of court orders.\textsuperscript{34}

The same might be said of the various branches of the insurgency where kidnapping, protection rackets, extortion and theft have been enabled by the powerful weapons in the hands of the insurgents and by their very credible threat to use violence if people do not submit. Economic opportunities have been created in a field of violence and the insurgents have not been slow to seize them.\textsuperscript{35} Whether this is to raise funds for the cause or for purposes of self-enrichment is a clouded question and in some senses immaterial – a cycle has been created that links the use of violence to the extortion of funds. This in turn increases the sphere of influence of the group, in part because it allows them to buy more weapons in the thriving Iraqi and regional market, thereby perpetuating the cycle.

This is not a cycle exclusive to the Islamist or nationalist groupings with – ostensibly – larger political agendas. A ruthless determination to use violence in the pursuit of wealth has been a feature of Iraq’s thriving criminal underworld – although given the openness with which some its members operate, that might be a misnomer. They have targeted foreigners as well as wealthy Iraqis, especially those returning from abroad, as lucrative kidnap victims. Sometimes they have been operating with the complicity of the security forces, and at other times and places they have cooperated with insurgent and also tribal groupings. The latter, because of their location along the porous borders of Iraq, have been particularly active in the smuggling trade in drugs, arms and people that have been so much a feature of Iraq, based on networks that go back to the sanction-busting years of the 1990s. In all of these dangerous and enterprising activities, violence is implicit, and sometimes used to terrible effect.\textsuperscript{36}
Nevertheless, the persistence, ubiquity and effectiveness of violence in achieving at least short term demonstrable, material gains have reinforced the political economy of violence. Its legacy in this sphere has been to establish its normality as a practice. Like the corruption to which it is closely connected, violence becomes a part of the everyday economy, sustaining a certain kind of order and underpinning the openings for enterprise that are created, however much this might be resented by many. Violence can thus become a way of carving out and protecting business interests. Of course, it is not practised by all members of the emerging entrepreneurial class, but they must take it into account, if only to allow for defensive measures and even a kind of insurance that may be indistinguishable from a protection racket. This in turn can perpetuate the entanglement of those involved with the networks of state power, the ‘shadow state’ standing behind the public institutions and declarations. The behaviour of state agencies, whether threatening or using violence, or indeed failing to investigate its occurrence, entwines the state elites with these practices, driven as much by the prospect of financial gain and extended power as by the declared goal of stability and social peace. It would suggest that those in power see violence as a way of avoiding systematic accountability. By turning a conversation about rights and answerability into one of violence, they ensure that their actions, their handling of public funds, or indeed their use of violence itself remain free from effective scrutiny.

Conclusion

Understanding violence in Iraq as a series of linked conversations with and about power refocuses attention on the processes by which the developing polity in Iraq is coming into being. In some respects, it harks back to the original Clausewitzian dialectical notion of the interplay between the forms of violence and the imaginative and structural political contexts in which they take place. However, in other respects the logic of communicative violence is better understood as a dialogic process, whereby ideational and strategic elements combine to produce outcomes that lead not to closure, but to the possibly temporary salience of one set of structures or ideas. Such an understanding provides a perspective on the enduring violence in Iraq that brings out a number of its key features.
and may help to clarify the forces that generate it, but also the processes that it has in turn set in motion.

The terms of the conversation reveal not only the intentions of the interlocutors, but also the grammar or idioms through which they believe it appropriate to carry on their exchanges. In this sense, the multiple uses and forms of violence in Iraq, the varied settings and the often terrible methods employed can be read as a language that conveys the political thinking of those who use it. In part this may be derived, like any language, from the subject’s experiences of the latent or explicit violence to which they or their community may have been exposed. Given the history of war, state repression, punitive sanctions and military occupation to which Iraq has been subjected in the past few decades, it is not difficult to understand why violence should have become so readily understandable as a form of communication. In part, the language may also be learned by instruction through texts, both virtual and literal, that are produced to make sense of a bewildering, chaotic and seemingly predatory environment. When reinforced by experience, these can anchor the uses of violence in a political and moral economy that determines, or at least that suggests the targets, the methods and the messages of violence, and in doing so helps to form the subject, defining and giving meaning to agency.

Like speech acts themselves, acts of violence are powerfully performative. The actors engage with an audience, or a number of audiences, depending upon the stage and the setting. The repertoires upon which they draw follow certain conventions, amplifying the meaning of solitary acts of violence, shaping the staging and the nature of those acts to communicate the messages of defiance, determination, cruelty, contempt or rejection that have formed the stock in trade of military occupiers, government forces and insurgents in Iraq since 2003. Nor can there be any denying the dramatic power of these performances, heightened by the deaths inflicted, the deliberately spectacular nature of suicide bombings and military bombardments, the demonstrative cruelty of punishments and tortures inflicted in the public gaze, as well as the wilful destruction of sites, buildings and symbols dear to those intended to be the main audience. In this way narratives are reproduced and strengthened through the conventions of a drama in which actors and audience participate.
The effects of these processes in Iraq have been most marked in the violent exchanges and performances that have revolved around the forms of power – state, communal and economic – that been the subject of this essay. In each of these interconnected spheres, the practice and ‘language’ of violence have caused unprecedented loss of life, human misery and destruction. They have also brought into being, or helped to construct, narratives about state, identity and class that will shape the course of Iraqi politics for some time to come. In this sense, therefore, violent communications, despite their destructive effects, are also socially constructive. This has been evident in the reconstruction of an authoritarian political order the leaders of which justify their hold on power and frequent use of coercion with reference to the terror spread by the insurgency. This is a rationale that resonates well amongst those who feel themselves threatened in their everyday lives by the continuing violence of groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq (more recently the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham). Despite public criticism of those who presently rule Iraq, the very circumstances of the state’s emergence have tended to reinforce the common sense of granting it a broad licence to use whatever violence is thought necessary to eliminate this ever-present threat, even if its very use may be a contributing factor.

In terms of Iraq’s society and its communal life, violence has brought about significant demographic and attitudinal changes. Forcible displacements in Basra, Baghdad and Baqubah have altered the character of these cities, as well as the relationships between their inhabitants. The Iraqi Christian community that numbered over one million in 2003, has been depleted by violence and the threat of violence, leaving less than half a million still in the country. Equally, the powerful, often murderous prevalence of the sectarian imaginary has transformed social difference, making it the basis of life and death choices, as well as determining the unequal distribution of power and resources in a confessional state. Furthermore, the scale and extent of corruption, the misappropriation of public funds and the emerging class order, bear witness to the continuing effects of violence as empires of privilege are carved out of the domain of public goods and criticism is silenced. As Fadhil al-Jamali suggested, the logic of violent communication does indeed introduce a note of deadly seriousness. As the past decade of Iraq’s modern history demonstrates,
these processes can eliminate people and possible alternatives, substituting for them structures and attitudes that have redefined Iraq’s institutions, spatial arrangements, as well as its geographies of the imagination.

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Endnotes


8. Daniel Rothenberg, “‘What we have seen has been terrible’ – public presentational torture and the communicative logic of state terror”, *Albany Law Review*, 67:2 (2003): 467-472, 481-4


18. The relatively conservative Iraq Body Count that relies on published sources for information estimates that up to 134,000 civilians were killed during the period 2003-2013 [accessed 6 February 2014]. Other estimates have put the number of civilian dead much higher at roughly 500,000 [accessed 6 February 2014]


22 Patrick Cockburn, Muqtada al-Sadr and the fall of Iraq (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 159-232


38 Hanna Rogan, ‘Abu Reuter and the e-jihad: virtual battlefronts from Iraq to the Horn of Africa,’ Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 8:2 (Summer/Fall 2007): 89-96. But see also the FBI training documents that suggest that the more ‘devout’ a Muslim, the more likely that person is to be violent – Spencer Ackerman, ‘FBI Islam guide pushed highly controversial views of Muslims,’ The Huffington Post, 27 September 2011 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/fbi-islam-guide [accessed 25 January 2014]