In retrospect, it seems the height of folly that the Abbasid rulers of Iraq had even considered resisting the Mongol conquest. By the end of the thirteenth century, the great force unleashed from the steppes of Central Asia had swept across the entire Asian continent, laying waste to multitudes of empires and kingdoms, including those in China, Persia, Russia and east Europe. In 1206, Chingiz Khan, the founder of what was to become the largest land empire in history, successfully unified the main nomadic Turkic and Mongol tribes east of the Altai Mountains under his command.1 To maintain this unity, he set out on a life-long career of conquest that was continued by his descendants after his death in 1227. In addition to their individual ruggedness and valor, collective solidarity and rapid mobility, Mongol success was also a result of widescale brutality and terror. The destruction and massacres that accompanied their advance spread fear and hastened the submission of new territories. Cities were given the choice between surrender and payment of tribute or a general massacre of the male population with the women and children carried off into slavery. Chingiz Khan’s first foray into Muslim territory, for example, was highlighted by a terrible massacre at Merv, one of the major cities of eastern Persia. Contemporary sources say that even dogs and cats were slaughtered after the extermination of the entire population. Similar fates befell the cities of Balkh, Herat and Nishapur which, in Mongol minds, did not represent anything of value to their nomadic, pastoral lifestyle. What made matters even worse was that the Mongols were shamanists who were not awed by the religious symbols of Islam. The Mongol conquest inaugurated a tumultuous
period of tribal ascendency and recurring foreign invasions which sorely tested the relations between Iraq’s many communities.

The fall of Baghdad

After a series of internal struggles culminating in 1251, Mongke, Chingiz Khan’s grandson, assumed general command of Mongol forces. In 1253, he dispatched his brother, Hulago, at the head of a large army of around 70,000 men to conquer the Islamic lands of the Middle East. While still in Persia attending to the remaining Isma’ili strongholds, Hulago sent word to the Abbasid Caliph al-Musta’sim demanding his submission. Al-Musta’sim stood his ground, threatening the Mongols with the wrath of the entire Muslim world should any harm befall him. This empty threat did not deter Hulago who entered Iraq in 1257 and by 11 January 1258 had completely besieged Baghdad. It became clear that the city could not hold out for long against the Mongols’ superior Chinese artillery. The caliph, after repeatedly proposing negotiations to no effect, made a desperate eleventh-hour attempt to avoid disaster by approaching Hulago in person, accompanied by Baghdad’s leading notables. On 10 February, the Commander of the Faithful, the 37th Abbasid caliph, the successor to the Prophet Muhammad, stood trembling before an unimpressed pagan khan. He begged him to spare the population in return for surrender. It was, however, too late. In one story it is related that the caliph was locked up with all his gold and left to starve to death. However his execution might have been, soon thereafter the Mongols entered the city. There are a number of descriptions, some based on eyewitness accounts, of the massacre and destruction that continued unabated for over a week. Ibn al-Athir’s is among the best known:

For several years I put off reporting this event. I found it terrifying and felt revulsion at recounting it and therefore hesitated again and again. Who would find it easy to describe the ruin of Islam and the Muslims? . . . O would that my mother had never borne me, that I had died before and that I were forgotten! . . . The report comprises the story of a . . . tremendous disaster such as had never happened before and which struck all the world, though the Muslims above all. If anyone were to say that at no time since the creation of man by the great God had the world experienced anything like it, he would be telling the truth. . . . It may well be that the world from now until its end . . . will not experience the like of it again. ²

Along with the over 100,000 killed, much of the city’s physical structure was damaged by fire and looting. Magnificent buildings, testament to an age of
knowledge and cultural vitality, like the Mosque of the Caliphs and the Shi‘i shrine at Kazim, were completely burned, while universities such as the Nizamiyya and Mustansiriyya were badly damaged, their libraries gutted. It is related that many a priceless book was tossed in the Tigris river. The most terrible damage, however, was that which befell the population itself. Those who survived the slaughter faced the prospect of rape and slavery. Here is how one described the scene:

... they swept through the city like hungry falcons attacking a flight of doves or like raging wolves attacking sheep, with loose rein and shameless faces, murdering and spreading fear. ... The massacre was so great that the blood of the slain flowed in a river like the Nile... With the broom of looting, they swept out the treasures from the harems of Baghdad... And a lament reached the ears... from roofs and gates... those hidden behind the veils of the great harem... were dragged like the hair of idols through the streets and alleys; each of them becoming a plaything in the hands of a Tatar monster, and the brightness of the day became darkened for these mothers of virtue.3

It is safe to say that though many Christians were spared, thanks to Hulago’s Christian wife, all Baghdadis suffered badly. Subsequent Sunni writers have claimed, with little justification, that the Shi‘i minister, ibn al-‘Alqami, treacherously aided the Mongol cause. Whatever action certain Shi‘i notables took made little difference in terms of the final outcome. Hulago had both Sunni and Shi‘i advisers, and the presence of prominent Shi‘is like Nasir al-Din Tusi did not prevent the Mongols from desecrating Shi‘i shrines or killing such important Shi‘i notables as ibn Tawus. In any case, the city’s leading Sunni figures soon gave Hulago’s authority religious sanction by declaring that a just non-Muslim ruler was preferable to an unjust Muslim. This may have helped to limit the destruction, though it shattered the already weakened image of Islamic political authority. Other massacres took place throughout the country, notably at Wasit and Mosul in 1262. Most cities, however, quickly submitted and were generally spared. An interesting exception was the Kurds who proved to be among the Mongols’ most consistent foes in northern Iraq. In Irbil, for example, even after the submission of the governor, the Kurdish garrison refused to lay down its arms and continued to resist for several years, seeking aid from the sultan of Egypt. After the fall of Irbil and the surrounding countryside, Mongol vengeance led to the depopulation of large areas in Shahrazur, whose Kurdish inhabitants fled en masse to Syria and Egypt, where even today there are communities in Beirut, Damascus and Cairo who claim descent from these refugees. The
advance of Hulago’s armies continued westward until they were halted in 1260 at ‘Ayn Jalut in Palestine by an Egyptian force.

In many ways, the fall of Baghdad represented a major watershed for the Islamic World and Iraq in particular. While the physical and human damage was great, the psychological effects were far more profound and lasting. Baghdad was not merely one of the greatest cities of the Islamic World but the seat of the caliphate, its most important religious–political institution, a symbol of its unity and protector of the orthodoxy of its faith. The death of al-Musta’sim represented the effective end of this essential symbol even though a shadow caliphate continued for some time in Cairo and Istanbul. Moreover, the caliph’s executioners were pagans, thus dealing a blow to Muslim pride and religious triumphalism. This gave further impetus to an already developing xenophobic tendency that looked upon the outside world and its culture as hostile and threatening. To this very day, Iraqis consider the name of Hulago synonymous with an overpowering calamity, and the events of 1258 continue to touch an emotional nerve since they are regarded among the causes of the region’s current problems. Little wonder then that during the second Gulf War of 1991, and the American-led invasion of 2003, Iraqi propaganda could hardly resist drawing on the imagery of the terrible Mongol conquest. Today, when reflecting on the widespread devastation and lawlessness in the country, the Iraqi press in all its shades regularly compares the situation with the post-Mongol period. Another important development was the deepening separation of Iraq from Egypt and Syria. Iraq’s strong ties with Persia and its separation from the eastern Mediterranean countries were not new, but the continuing Mongol hostility to the rulers of Egypt and Syria, and the frequent wars between them, broadened the divide. Lastly, Mongol rule effectively undermined the dominant position of the officially sanctioned orthodox or shari’a-minded Sunni Islam, opening the way for the spread of Shi’ism and various brands of popular and mystical Islamic tendencies.

The Il-Khanate

For the next three centuries, Iraqi history forms a confused picture of weak central authority, division, a rapid succession of dynasties and numerous invasions. The vast Mongol Empire was divided into autonomous territories that gradually gained complete independence. The territory ruled by Hulago and his descendants, known as the Il-Khanate, included Persia, Azerbaijan and Iraq. Tabriz eventually became the capital, with Baghdad reduced to
a provincial centre. Northern Iraq was governed from Mosul. Everyday administrative tasks were placed in the hands of a governor (usually, but not always, of Persian origin), but final authority lay with the Mongol military commanders stationed at the important cities. Under the governorship of 'Ata Malik al-Juwayni, who administered Baghdad for over two decades after the invasion, the city showed signs of limited recovery. Some of the buildings were repaired, a number of scholars returned, trade picked up and a tolerable taxation system was implemented. Nevertheless, the overall picture was one of decline which continued well into the sixteenth century. The ruling group, now composed of nomads, was eager to transform large areas of agricultural land to pastures and to milk the peasants for all they were worth, regardless of long-term damage. Taxes increased dramatically, particularly in the countryside. In addition to raising the old land and poll taxes the Il-Khans instituted a number of commercial and extraordinary taxes that were usually collected in advance several times a year. This tax burden was not shared equally. In some areas, the peasants paid as much as 66 per cent of their harvest, usually in kind, while the urban areas suffered less.

The people of Iraq also had to contend with increasing feudal-like practices and chronic instability that bound the peasants to the land, encouraged political fragmentation and discouraged trade and long-term investment. Most serious of all was the deterioration of the irrigation system of canals, leading to a rapid reduction in the size of cultivated land. Such economic deterioration, when accompanied with ruthless exploitation and periodic massacre of peasants, was bound to affect the demographic picture. Although the decline of the population started much earlier than the Mongol invasion, the general decline and instability that followed accelerated this process. In addition to the blood-letting and adverse conditions in agriculture already mentioned, malnourishment, epidemics and flight all contributed to the complete depopulation of large areas. In one estimate, the province of Diyala in central Iraq, including Baghdad, declined from about 400,000 in 1100 to only 60,000 after the Mongol invasion. Lamenting this state, Juwayni, who was patronized by the early Il-Khans, wrote:

\[
\ldots\text{every town and every village has been several times subjected to pillage and massacre and has suffered this confusion for years, so that even though there be generation and increase until the Resurrection the population will not attain a tenth part of what it was before.}\]

Baghdad, which still struggled to retain part of its economic and cultural lustre, declined in size and importance behind Tabriz, the new Il-Khanid capital and centre of international trade in Azerbaijan. Baghdad and Basra
were particularly hurt by the shift in trade routes further east. Prior to
Mongol rule, the lucrative trade with India went through the Persian Gulf
and Basra to Baghdad and the Mediterranean. During the Il-Khanate and its
successors, this route was gradually replaced with the Hormuz–Tabriz axis
through Persia. In addition, the Il-Khans’ continuous wars with the Sultanate
of Egypt and Syria interrupted the long-established commercial ties of Iraq
with the Mediterranean. There is no doubt that Iraq’s incorporation into the
huge Mongol realm fostered greater trade links with Persia and Central Asia.
This, however, did not make up for the decline of the India and Mediterranean
trade. To make matters worse, corruption and mismanagement left the
state completely bankrupt by 1294. In response, paper currency notes called
the *ch’ao*, an idea imported from China, were introduced to replace the
increasingly scarce metal coins. The new unfamiliar notes were completely rejected by the public. Within a short time, the whole scheme had to be abandoned, but not before causing confusion and bringing all trade to a standstill in Baghdad. The general economic decline is best summed up by the state revenue figures as quoted by al-Qazwini. Notwithstanding the higher taxes, state revenues fell from about 30 million dinars during the reign of the Caliph al-Nasir (1180–1225), to only 3 million in 1336.

Mongol rule had an important impact on Iraq’s sectarian relations. For over 40 years, most of the Il-Khans were shamanists and it appears that Nestorian Christians, in particular, benefited from the overthrow of Muslim authority. The jizya tax was removed, new churches were built, some Christians acted as ambassadors of the Il-Khans to the Europeans and they were no longer barred from high offices with authority over Muslims. In Irbil, for example, a Christian, Taj al-Din Mukhtas, was appointed governor and the community witnessed a period of growth and prosperity. Christian highlanders were recruited to form auxiliary forces to help control the mountainous areas of the Jazira region. By the end of the century, as the Il-Khans gradually adopted Islam, these early gains were often violently rolled back. In 1295, three churches were destroyed by the Mongols and in 1310 mob attacks ultimately led to the elimination of the entire Christian community there. Similar developments took place in Baghdad, with early signs of prosperity followed by mob attacks and flight. The Jews also benefited from the removal of the jizya tax and in 1283 a Jewish physician from Mosul, known as Sa’d al-Dawla, was appointed finance minister. Taking advantage of the Il-Khan’s patronage Sa’d al-Dawla had his two brothers appointed governors of Baghdad and Mosul, respectively, and other relatives were placed in important posts throughout Iraq. Though he served the Il-Khans competently, balancing the books and increasing tax returns, his arrogance earned him enemies who, after the death of his patron in 1291, had him executed. The demise of Sa’d al-Dawla triggered widespread attacks against Jews in Baghdad, Mosul and other cities. The conversion of the Il-Khan Ghazan to Islam in 1295 marked a particularly bad time for non-Muslims. He reinstated the jizya, ordered the destruction of many churches and temples, established separate dress codes for Jews and Christians and tended to turn a blind eye toward mob violence against them. Many converted to Islam, but Christians usually fled to the countryside, causing their numbers in urban areas to remain low up to the late nineteenth century. The Jews, more accustomed to periodic waves of persecution, weathered the storm and remained an important part of the urban population in most Iraqi cities up to the mid-twentieth century.
The Shi’is also benefited from the blow to Sunni Islam. Shi’i influence in the courts of the Il-Khans remained substantial, and Hilla, the centre of Shi’i scholarship at this time, was spared the devastation that rained on other cities during the Mongol advance. Ghazan’s conversion was to Sunni Islam, but he still had a high regard for Shi’ism, as demonstrated by his recurrent visits to the shrines at Najaf and Karbala. His successor, Khudabanda, actually converted to Shi’ism in 1309, making it the official religion of the Il-Khanate until his death in 1316. In general, the relations between Sunnis and Shi’is, which had been tense and often violent during the preceding centuries, greatly improved under the Il-Khans. The threat that Islam as a whole received at the hands of the early Mongols pushed the two sides closer together. This was reflected among scholars by a decline in the number of polemical works directed at one another, the use of a more respectful tone when they did debate and, more importantly, extensive borrowing of each other’s ideas. Among Sunnis, the virtuous roles of ‘Ali and the family of the Prophet were highlighted to the point where some, while not accepting the notion of divine inspiration, agreed that ‘Ali was superior to the first three caliphs. Shi’i influences were particularly strong among Sunni mystics (sufis) who emphasized ‘Ali’s esoteric knowledge and even adopted some Shi’i practices. For Shi’is, the most important impact was the progressive integration of Islamic mysticism, which had been dominated by Sunni scholarship, into Shi’i beliefs.

The conversion of the Mongols to Islam marks a remarkable, though not completely surprising, turn of events. As with their kinsmen in China, the Mongol Il-Khans ended up adopting the culture and mannerisms of the sophisticated societies they ruled. This was a gradual process of assimilation in which Ghazan’s conversion in 1295 was an important point. Initially, they were prone to favour mystical sufi Islam over the shari’a-minded schools. Ghazan’s conversion was part of an effort at creating a more centralized state in which the alienation between rulers and ruled would be ameliorated, and improved productivity could yield higher tax returns. Under the direction of his prime minister, Rashid al-Din, a broad set of reforms was introduced, chief of which was the regulation of taxation. Other reforms included the digging of canals, improved security for travelling merchants, the standardization of weights and measures, the reopening of the mints at Wasit, Hilla and Basra, a more cohesive system of justice based on the Islamic shari’a and the centralization and regulation of the iqt’a grants. These reforms, though impressive on paper, enjoyed only limited success because of the general inability of the state to enforce them. In fact, the death of Ghazan in 1304 ushered in a period of factional struggles spearheaded by
the two main competing households of the Chapanids and the Jalayirids. The Il-Khan Abu Sa'id, who assumed effective control in 1327, was able to bring back some semblance of central control, but his death without heirs in 1335 marked an intensification of factional conflicts and the eventual fragmentation of the empire. Lastly, it should be mentioned that the Il-Khans adopted Persian culture and became enthusiastic patrons of the arts. During their time, Chinese and Central Asian taste and decorative vocabulary came into the Middle East, transforming the existing architectural traditions and revitalizing the arts of book illustration. A distinctly Central Asian design is evident in many of the shrines of the period, such as the domes of Dhu al-Kafal (built in 1316) and the Suhrawardi shrine (1334), both of which resemble the Buddhist pagoda structures found in and around Mongolia.

**Jalayirid and Turkoman rule**

As the Il-Khanate slowly fell apart and various claimants rapidly succeeded one another, Iraq came under the control of Hasan Buzurg and his Jalayirid household. The Jalayirids were a prominent Mongol family who had accompanied Hulago to Baghdad. Under the leadership of Hasan Buzurg’s son, Shaykh Uways (r. 1356–1374), the Jalayirids formed an independent state which expanded to include most of Azerbaijan. The Jalayirids were unable to reverse the overall decline of Iraq, but they are remembered for a number of important architectural projects such as the mosque and khan of Marjan in Baghdad. Among the administrative practices that had an adverse effect at the time was the selling of offices, including those of important governorships. Several uprisings and invasions interrupted their rule. Soon after the death of Shaykh Uways, a bloody struggle erupted between the Sultan Jalal al-Din and his two brothers, the governors of Baghdad and Basra. Not long after this, the country had to contend with two invasions by Timur Lang, the great conqueror from Samarkand. Timur’s conquests were, in some cases, more destructive than those of the Mongols. In 1393, he spared the population of Baghdad because most of the notables welcomed him in the hope that he would bring relief from the abuses of Jalayirid rule. In 1401, however, he was forced to re-conquer the city and this time a general massacre followed. Timur’s second conquest was far more devastating than even that of Hulago a century and a half earlier. In addition to the physical destruction and the lives lost, a large number of skilled workers and scholars – the basic foundation of economic and cultural production – were forcibly transported to Samarkand. This time the city failed to recover even a portion of its past stature. While greatly diminished from its heyday under the
Abbasids, Baghdad continued to represent an important economic, political and cultural centre throughout the period of the Il-Khans and the Jalayirids. After this last blow, however, it sunk to the position of a secondary provincial town with little to offer except memories of past glories.

Timur conquered a huge area from Delhi to Damascus but was unable to consolidate this territory into a lasting empire, which duly fell apart after his death in 1405. The Jalayirid ruler, who escaped before Timur’s advancing army, returned to Baghdad in 1405 and attempted some repairs. But at this point, weakened by the Timurid onslaught, the Jalayirids did not last much longer. In 1410, a Turkoman federation known as the Qara Qoyunlu (“Black Sheep”) seized most of Iraq. The Qara Qoyunlu were a nomadic people whose pastures extended from Mosul (which fell under their control intermittently) to the region of Van to the north. Despite previous hostilities, they formed a tenuous alliance with the last Jalayirid ruler to oppose the Timurid invasions. In the tumultuous climate of the time, this alliance soon broke down and the last Jalayirid leaders were pursued to the south where they continued to exercise authority over Hilla, Wasit and Basra until 1432. Among their strongest allies in northern Iraq were the Kurds, especially those of the Bidlis clan, who figured prominently in the administration and military. During Qara Qoyunlu rule, Iraq sank to new levels of misery and poverty. Regional rivalries, particularly between Baghdad and Mosul, intensified, as did the level of decentralization in general. The founder of the dynasty and conqueror of Iraq, Qara Yusuf, was noted for his cruelty, which he applied regardless of the victim’s social or religious standing. In 1417, in a fit of anger, he ordered that the qadi of Baghdad, the 70-year-old Taj al-Din Ahmad, have his nose cut off for his insolent behaviour. According to one contemporary: “The sons of Kara Yusuf altogether are the wildest people God has created, in their days the lands of Iraq and Persia and the town of Baghdad have been ruined.”

This level of misrule accelerated the de-urbanization of Iraq, especially with respect to Baghdad and Basra.

The Qara Qoyunlu period witnessed a rise, albeit in a confused manner, of various Shi‘i tendencies among broad sections of the population. This Shi‘i ferment also affected sections of the ruling group. Jahan Shah (r. 1439–1467), whose reign marked the apogee of Qara Qoyunlu power, showed some favour to Shi‘ism, issuing coins with both Shi‘i and Sunni inscriptions. His brother, the governor of Baghdad, is said to have converted to Twelver Shi‘ism in 1444. Shi‘ism, however, remained, as it had in the past, strongly imbued with an ideology of popular protest. When the Qara Qoyunlu were evicted from Iraq between 1467 and 1469, their successors adopted a staunch Sunni outlook. The new rulers of Iraq were yet another Turkoman tribal federation.
from Eastern Anatolia known as the Aq Qoyunlu (“White Sheep”). Their primary pasture grounds were centred between Diyar Bakr and Amid, just west of Qara Qoyunlu territory. The two tribes had, in fact, been rivals for many generations. In Diyar Bakr, the Aq Qoyunlu took revenge on the Kurdish allies of their rivals by exterminating their leading families. Under Uzun Hasan they conquered, in addition to Iraq, most of Azerbaijan and Persia. The Aq Qoyunlu proved to be the last of the great nomadic dynasties to exert such broad control over Iraq. Within the next 50 years, the region would witness the rise of stable empires capable of using new military methods to enforce a high degree of order. The first sign of this change came in 1473 when Uzun Hasan’s nomadic cavalry were soundly defeated by the artillery of the rising Ottoman state. Despite this defeat, the Aq Qoyunlu continued to govern Iraq up to 1508. Their rule brought a degree of order to Baghdad and, towards the end, they instituted a number of reforms designed to reduce the power of the nomadic chiefs in favour of greater central control. Chief among these reforms was the full implementation of the shari’a at the expense of tribal customary law. This was bound to stir up resistance within both the ruling group and the lower classes, hastening the fall of Turkoman rule.

Turkoman dominance had important long-term consequences for the economic and social development of Iraq. Feudal divisions reached their highest point during this period where the old iqta’ estates became a hereditary grant. In the past, the reigning sultan could revoke and reassign a land grant. Under the new conditions of weak central authority, the landholder won the right to administer his estate almost free from any state interference. In periods of relative stability, this might have resulted in greater investment in the productive forces of the land. In the conditions of fifteenth-century Iraq, however, such authority only led to increasing disintegration, savage exploitation of the peasantry and the further decline of agricultural productivity. Trade also continued to suffer. Under the Jalayirids, the ordinary commercial tax amounted to 2.5 per cent. During the Turkoman period, it reached 10 per cent, despite an overall decline in Iraq’s share of the East–West transit trade. The weak central government and the decline in agriculture and trade encouraged the development of the pastoral sector and, concomitantly, a rise in the power of nomadic and semi-settled tribes. These tribes not only represented the invading Mongols and Turkomans but, more importantly, the indigenous Arab and Kurdish peoples. Under the dual pressure of a rapacious central government and roaming armies of pillagers, peasants had to place themselves under the protection of large tribal federations such as the Khafaja and Muntafiq of the middle and lower Euphrates,
the Banu Lam and Rabi'a along the Tigris and, in the north, the Kurdish tribes of Bilbas, Jaf and Harki. Soon the tribes dominated the countryside and most of the towns, leaving their stamp firmly fixed upon the nature of Iraqi society up to the present. Well into the nineteenth century, about three-quarters of the people of Iraq still had strong rural tribal affiliations.

The instability and low productivity of the time brought famine and disease in their wake. In 1342/3, a famine affected the entire region and was followed by several others throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The bubonic plague, known as the Black Death in Europe, struck Iraq in the summer of 1347 and was still raging in 1349. Precise information on its demographic impact is lacking, but it is known to have carried off more than one-quarter of the population of Europe and there is no reason to believe it was less severe in Iraq. Subsequent epidemics were recorded for 1394, 1416, 1425, 1431, 1436, 1438 and 1470. The combination of poor security and declining economic fortunes led to the complete abandonment of several cities. Basra, Baghdad’s primary outlet to the sea and one of the most important ports of the medieval world, was in the process of being abandoned when ibn Batuta, the great Moroccan traveller, visited in the mid-fourteenth century. Threats from the desert tribes, the silting up of canals and the expansion of the marshes pushed its inhabitants to move closer to the Shatt al-`Arab river, where modern Basra now stands. Wasit, the capital of the Umayyad province and a centre of minting, was attacked by Shi`i rebels in 1438, 1440 and 1442. In 1454, after yet another sacking, the population dispersed to other towns. Even Hilla, the important centre of Shi`i scholarship, was not spared. Ironically, it was Shi`i tribes who, in 1453, sacked and burned it to the ground.

**The Musha‘sha‘ challenge**

In the face of such disasters, indigenous uprisings were bound to develop. True to their time, all such movements expressed themselves through religious ideas, usually some form of messianic Shi‘ism. By far the most powerful of these protest movements was the so-called Musha'sha' rebellion of the mid-fifteenth century. The founder of this movement was Muhammad ibn Falah, a descendent of the Prophet and a disciple of one of the leading Shi‘i scholars of fifteenth-century Hilla. Ibn Falah was strongly influenced by mysticism and messianic notions, both of which had been spreading throughout the post-Mongol Middle East. In 1436, having been expelled from Hilla for his unorthodox views, he and his small number of mystic followers found refuge among the Arab tribes of the marshes around Wasit.
There he convinced the leaders of several tribes, particularly the Banu Sulama and Tayyi', to unite under his authority. Initially, he won over their loyalty by claiming esoteric knowledge and the mystical ability to perform supernatural acts, both of which earned him the title of *al-Musha'ша*, meaning the “Radiant”. With time, he came to declare that he was the Mahdi, the one who will lead Muslims to victory over injustice prior to the Day of Judgement. His son, Mawla 'Ali, took these ideas a step further by claiming to be the incarnation of the spirit of ‘Ali, the first Imam of Shi’ism. It is interesting to note that this movement had much in common with the Zanj and Qarmatians of the ninth and tenth centuries. In addition to its Shi’i overtones, it also emphasized the plight of the poor and condemned the tyranny and hypocrisy of the rich landowners. Like its predecessors, the Musha’ша’ movement was based in the marshes of southern Iraq, a large, inaccessible region where rebels can easily find refuge. These marshes continued to act as a refuge for various opposition groups, until Saddam Husayn’s regime drained the swamps, ending a way of life that had continued unchanged since the ancient Sumerians.

While such notions might have won over some, it was ibn Falah’s and his son’s ability to organize successful raids which cemented his leadership. As his raids proved lucrative, more recruits joined the growing movement. Initially, he attacked the landlords around Wasit but, after suffering a defeat there, he turned south and took Huwayza which became his primary base. As the Qara Qoyunlu weakened, the Musha’ша’ launched raids on Wasit (which he ruled intermittently), Basra and even around Baghdad. Najaf was sacked and the shrine of ‘Ali was looted. In 1453, Hilla was destroyed and its countryside continued under the control of ibn Falah until shortly after his death in 1466. Travel was so insecure that even the pilgrim caravans to Mecca were not spared. Ibn Falah’s successor, Sultan Muhammad, tried to consolidate the fledgling state through more permanent control of territory, the appointment of governors and the regular collection of taxes. His authority spread throughout southern Iraq all the way to the environs of Baghdad. To enhance his image in the cities, he attempted to attract respected Shi’i scholars to his court in Huwayza. In turn, the presence of such scholars as Shams al-Din Astarabadi helped to moderate Musha’ша’i views, drawing it closer to mainstream Twelver Shi’ism. The independence of the Musha’ша’ state came to an end through its gradual incorporation into the Persian Safavid Empire during the early sixteenth century. This was the only indigenous movement to challenge the power of the Turkoman dynasties but, even in its heyday, it remained limited to the countryside, unable to develop a strong backing in any of the important urban areas.
Urban organizations

During the Mongol and Turkoman periods, the urban centres of Iraq developed their own means of responding to the problems of tyranny and insecurity. There, exploitation was not as severe as in the countryside and radicalism not as popular. The preference, for most people, was to protect their community through various methods of mutual aid. Since the usual state-supported services, like the police and the judiciary, grew progressively weaker, community groups attempted to fill the vacuum. Different types of social organizations, which had appeared much earlier, took on new roles and moved to the forefront. Certainly the most prominent were the associations of sharifs. The sharifs, or sayyids, were those who had a recognized claim to being descendants of the Prophet and whose lineage guaranteed them a high social standing. In addition to their honourable lineage, the sharifs were normally men of learning and wealth who enjoyed broad privileges, including exemption from most taxes. Their activities on behalf of the poor, such as distributing free meals during the month of Ramadhan or coming to the aid of families in need with gifts and favours, gained them a solid popular backing. The sharifs came to form an important bloc, organized within associations, with individual members exercising influence in their neighbourhoods. The head of these associations was called the Naqib al-Ashraf. The associations acted as guardians of the religious shrines and played a role in the administration of neighbourhoods, resolving disputes, managing relief work to the poor and acting as representatives of the people when called upon. During the Mongol conquest, for example, the Shi'a sharif, Majd al-Din Muhammad ibn Tawus, acted as Hilla’s chief representative and negotiated its peaceable surrender. The same occurred a century and a half later at Mosul during Timur Lang’s siege of the city. Its Naqib al-Ashraf, Nasir al-Din ‘Ubaydullah al-Araj, again successfully negotiated an amicable surrender.

The position of Naqib al-Ashraf was, in theory, filled through an appointment by the ruler after consulting with the leading sharifs. In practice, this only occurred when the ruler was firmly in control. To bring some stability to these associations, the Naqib al-Ashraf gradually came to be dominated by only one or two families. In Mosul, the al-Araj family normally held the post while the Rifa’i family were the recognized leaders at Basra. Since Baghdad was the seat of government, the association had a more difficult time establishing its autonomy, and the sharifs remained without a recognized leader for long periods at a time. Nevertheless, the Gaylani family continued to wield substantial authority, particularly within
the large quarter of Bab al-Shaykh. During the Ottoman period, they finally gained official recognition as the hereditary holders of the Naqib al-Ashraf office in Baghdad. The associations of sharifs were naturally influenced by the forces affecting the different cities. In Baghdad and Basra, for example, sufism played an important role in determining the leadership. Thus, in Baghdad, the Gaylanis were also the leaders of the mystical Qadiriyya order, while at Basra the Rifa’is were the leaders of the Rifa’iyya order. At Najaf, a seat of Shi'i learning, the sharifs who controlled the associations came from the Shi'i scholars, while those at Karbala usually belonged to one of the two tribal federations which dominated the town.

Other important social organizations which played a prominent role during this time were the sufi orders or brotherhoods. During the post-Mongol period, orthodox or shari’a-minded Islam received a paralyzing blow both to its leading figures (the execution of the caliph and a number of leading shari’a scholars), and to its main patron, the Islamic state. To an extent, the defeat of the caliphate was also a defeat for the exponents of its ideological base. This is not to say that shari’a scholars were completely discredited after the Mongol conquest, but certainly the new conditions in which they functioned limited their influence. To fill the void, many people sought out the assistance of sufi mystics. The sufis had always retained the reputation of remaining close to the popular classes with their public displays of going into trances and performing supernatural feats, their asceticism and self-denial and their dedication to charitable activities. Their focus on allegorical tales and a generally more flexible approach to religious interpretation appealed more to the common people than the legalistic arguments of the shari’a scholars. Sufis also tended to emphasize the emotional side of faith. The poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi (d.1273), who visited Baghdad and left a profound influence there, typifies this:

In your light I learn how to love.  
In your beauty, how to make poems.  
You dance inside my chest,  
Where no one sees you,  
But sometimes I do, and that  
Sight becomes this art. 

The premise of esoteric knowledge, central to sufi thinking, allowed for the development of a strong, intimate master–disciple relationship characterized by an unquestioning obedience and even veneration of the sufi master. In addition to the disciples, a large number of people regularly attended the mystics’ liturgical sessions (usually held on Thursdays), in special lodges
known as zawiyas, seeking emotional fulfilment and acceptance in an age of uncertainty and danger. As a result, a powerful bond was established which cut across class and communal lines, acting as a unifying factor in society. At the centre of these fraternities were the sufi shaykhs whose opinions were held in high esteem and were essential to the functioning of communities.

Iraq was the first place within the Islamic world where sufi orders developed. In addition to the previously mentioned Qadiriyya and Rifa'iyya orders, there were a number of orders whose disregard for orthodox Islamic sensibilities offended many scholars. Among the most unorthodox were the Qalandariyya, who had a large lodge in thirteenth-century Baghdad known as the Qaladarkhana. Its followers tended to openly disregard the shari'a and were known to practise alchemy, fortune-telling and the preparation of magic potions. Another order, which was particularly popular among the Turkomans, was the Mawlawiyya, known for its practice of “whirling” to achieve a trance. Their sessions, sometimes accompanied by the beating of drums and music, attracted huge crowds but few dedicated followers. During the fifteenth century, the Naqshabandiyya order, originating in Central Asia, gradually made inroads among the Kurds of Mosul and Shahrazur. Leaders of this order would later play important roles in the Kurdish nationalist movement of the twentieth century.

Sufi orders had a special relationship with the numerous guild associations. Prior to the Mongol invasion, the economic activities of the various artisans, craftsmen and small shop owners, were, to an extent, regulated by the state. After the decline in the power of the central state, more of this regulatory burden had to be sustained by the urban classes themselves. The asnaf, as these guilds were known, developed slowly, reaching their full maturity during the latter part of Ottoman rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when they would again submit to central government control. The early development of the asnaf was greatly influenced by the futuwwa organizations of the late Abbasid period. Much of the vocabulary used for the different positions within the guilds, or ceremonies, like those of the induction of new members, resembled those of the futuwwas. In addition to regulating the various economic activities of the trades, including the collection of taxes for the authorities, they also functioned as social institutions, fostering a strong sense of group identity.

The asnaf were normally organized in a hierarchical fashion, with an elected shaykh at the helm assisted by a treasurer and secretary. As with the sufi orders, the leadership of the asnaf soon developed into a hereditary post monopolized by the prominent families. The shaykh oversaw the
administrative and economic functioning of the guild and acted to resolve disputes between its members. He also represented the interests of his members in meetings with other guilds or the authorities, and in ceremonial functions like festivals and parades. Below the shaykh there were at least four other levels, starting with the master of the trade and ending with the simple servant. A partial list of the asnaf of Baghdad included those of the butchers, cooks, millers, bakers, weavers, tailors, dyers, tanners, silver- and goldsmiths, sword-makers, brick-layers, eye physicians, sailors, paper-makers, book-binders, carpenters, brokers, night-watchmen, porters, blacksmiths and saddle-makers. Sufi orders often overlapped with the asnaf so that, at times, it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. Most of the asnaf would start their meetings with a couple of hours of sufi liturgy before settling down to deal with the practical issues confronting their trade. Sufi shaykhs were very often also the leaders of some of the asnaf, and the hierarchies of both groups tended to overlap. Notwithstanding their religious character, many of the asnaf included non-Muslim members. The most normal feature, however, was for the reflection of religious divisions in the division of labour. The commerce in food items, for example, was controlled by Muslim merchants while the money-changers were mostly Jews. In addition, some of the trades were dominated by particular tribes from the surrounding countryside. During the late Ottoman period, most of the porters of Baghdad were affiliated to the Al Bu Mafraj tribe, the cooks usually came from the Banu ‘Izz, the makers of reed mats were dominated by the Ja‘ayfur and the butchers by the Mahdiyya.

Iraq under the Safavids

During the fifteenth century, the Shi‘i and sufi ferment of the post-Mongol period came together through the rise of the Safavid movement in Azerbaijan. Originally, this movement, which would rule Iran and expand Shi‘i influence in the area, was a sufi order, the Safawiyya, founded by Safi al-Din in the early fourteenth century. Over the course of the next two centuries, it would develop political ambitions and a strong emphasis on the veneration of ‘Ali and the twelve Imams. By the time the seven-year-old Isma‘il inherited its leadership in 1494, the Aq Qoyunlu state was in disarray as rival claimants fought over the throne. Isma‘il, at this time, was not merely considered a sufi shaykh demanding absolute obedience, but also a leader with divine attributes. This highly unorthodox movement had a core following of Turkoman tribesmen known as the Qizilbash, or “Redheads”, due to the red caps they wore. Their fanatical devotion and fearless participation in battle
allowed Isma'il to defeat the last of the Aq Qoyunlu rulers and take Tabriz in 1501. There he was crowned shah and proclaimed Twelver Shi’ism the official religion of his empire. Iran, at this time, was predominantly Sunni and Shi’ism had to be imposed by force. Leading religious figures were obliged to curse the first three caliphs and proclaim the new faith in public or face brutal reprisals, including execution. This policy, which eventually converted Iranian society to Shi’ism, was in full swing when Isma'il sent his general, Lala Husayn Beg Shamlu, to conquer Baghdad in 1508. For the Safavids, Iraq was not only important for strategic reasons. The existence there of the major Shi’i shrines at Najaf, Karbala, Kazim and Samarra made its control an important source of prestige and legitimacy. The Safavid entry into Baghdad was accompanied by a massacre of many of the leading Sunni figures and the desecration of Sunni shrines like the Abu Hanifa Mosque. Christians were also singled out for persecution and within a short period they were completely wiped out of the city. This was followed by an advance on the south where Basra surrendered without a fight and the Musha’sha’ state swore allegiance to the new Shi’i empire. Despite the importance of the Shi’i shrines, Safavid control of Iraq remained tenuous.

There is little doubt that the Safavid Empire was poised to dominate Iraq and the heartland of Islam were it not for the Ottoman Turks. The Ottoman Empire was the heir to the Seljuks. Having started as a small principality in central Anatolia in the late thirteenth century, they expanded steadily at the expense of the declining Byzantine Empire. Despite a major defeat at the hands of Timur Lang in 1401, they continued to expand, and in 1453 they scored one of Islam’s greatest victories by taking Constantinople. The Ottomans were eager to portray themselves as the leaders of Sunni Islam, the heirs of the Abbasids, carrying the new religion into infidel Europe at a time when the other major Sunni state in Egypt was in decline. For them, Shi’i Islam was not merely a heresy, but a threat to their image as the unrivalled leaders of the Islamic world. When the Safavid state was established, a direct military confrontation was inevitable. Safavid influence had reached eastern Anatolia and in 1511 and 1512 major Shi’i revolts broke out against Ottoman rule. The Ottoman Sultan Selim “The Grim” responded with a brutal repression of the revolt, followed by a massive invasion of Safavid territory. The two great empires representing the main competing branches of Islam met in 1514 at a site called Chaldiran in Azerbaijan. In some ways, the ensuing battle resembled the Ottomans’ victory against the Aq Qoyunlu in 1473. With their superior numbers and weaponry, notably field artillery and hand guns, they secured a decisive victory against the Qizilbash and their young God-king.
Shah Isma’i’l escaped and the Safavid Empire survived to fight another day, but the line dividing Ottoman Sunni influence from that of Persian Shi’ism was drawn. Sultan Selim occupied Tabriz for a while but eventually had to withdraw. Mosul, Shahrazur and Diyar Bakr fell under Ottoman control and, in the next two years, Syria and Egypt followed suit. In return for their support, Sultan Selim allowed the Kurds of Shahrazur to establish a number of autonomous principalities such as Baban, Suran and Bahdinan.

The rest of Iraq remained under Safavid control, even though its hold grew progressively weaker. Rather than ruling Iraq directly, the Safavids recognized the leaders of the Kurdish Mawsillu tribe as the governors of Baghdad. In 1526, a rival Mawsillu leader by the name of Dhu al-Faqar Nukhud Sultan, defeated the Safavid governor of Baghdad, Ibrahim Khan, and declared his allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. Apparently, Dhu al-Faqar was a popular ruler, maintaining his hold on central Iraq for over two years before the Safavid Shah Tahmasp recaptured Baghdad in 1529. Shah Tahmasp brought Iraq under direct Safavid administration and it appeared that the country would soon be fully integrated into the empire. The Ottomans, however, were encouraged by the support which Dhu al-Faqar was given and, in 1533, Sultan Sulayman, known in the West as “the Magnificent”, set out at the head of a large army to conquer Iraq. On 18 November 1534, he was presented with the keys of Baghdad by its leading Sunni notables and entered the city to the general acclaim of the population. The Ottoman sultan was eager to avoid destruction and unnecessary sectarian strife. He ordered his troops to camp outside the city walls and made a point of visiting both Sunni and Shi’i shrines, promising peace and justice to all. Despite this show of goodwill, Ottoman conflicts with Persian rulers in the following centuries continued to adversely affect Sunni–Shi’i relations.

Iraq’s entry into the Ottoman orbit represented the end of a tumultuous period which witnessed an overall economic and demographic decline, increasing fragmentation and the rise of tribal power throughout the country. This weakness was highlighted by repeated invasions from abroad which prevented the rise of an indigenous force capable of bringing some order. This sorry state contrasted sharply with the inhabitants’ image of the prosperous past, which continued to represent a source of pride for the small urban elite. Despite the threat of complete fragmentation, Baghdad continued to act as an administrative and cultural centre with ties to the various parts of Iraq. The battle of Chaldiran and the subsequent campaign of Sultan Sulayman inaugurated a new epoch where Iraq found itself situated between the two main powers of the Middle East. Iraq was often the battlefield on which the two empires repeatedly collided. More importantly,
the relatively peaceful relationship between Sunnis and Shi’is, which had developed during the preceding period, was threatened as the Ottoman–Safavid struggle increasingly took on a religious character.

**Notes and references**

1. The Turko-Mongol armies were sometimes called “Tatar” in reference to one of the main tribes under Chingiz Khan’s confederation.
3. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 120–1.