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From Militant Secularism to Islamism: The Iraqi Ba'th Regime 1968-2003

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On a hot summer day in 1986 Saddam Hussein convened in Baghdad an emergency closed-door meeting of the Pan-Arab Leadership (*al-qiyadah al-qawmiyyah*, PAL), the Ba’th regime’s highest ideological institution. In the meeting he presented to the party’s luminaries a momentous U-turn in Iraq’s foreign policy. This U-turn had potentially profound ramifications for the regime’s domestic policy, party ideology and identity. Saddam, by then President of Iraq and Deputy Secretary General of the Pan-Arab Leadership (Secretary General Michel ‘Aflaq was absent, possibly intentionally not invited), suggested a truce and even some tacit alliance with the Sudanese and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB).² This policy shift meant that, for the first time in its history, the militantly secular Ba’th party would cease to attack and would even tolerate the Islamists. Until then, the Islamists – Sunnis as well as Shi’is - were the Ba’this’ staunchest enemies.³ Indeed, in 1986 Iraq was conducting an existential war against an Islamist regime: Khomeini’s Iran. The 1986 PAL meeting and decision were secret, and remained this way for a while, but Saddam’s policy shifts eventually became public.

Cooperation with the Syrian MB dates back to at least since 1982, but it required no meaningful modification of either party policy or ideology. Following the Hamah massacre of September of that year the Syrian MB were weak and totally dependent on Iraqi support against the Ba’th regime of Hafiz al-Asad in Damascus. This cooperation between the two grossly unequal partners was kept strictly clandestine. The reason for this was a secret meeting in Baghdad in late September 1982 between senior Ba’th officials and a very senior delegation of the Syrian MB.

¹ This article is based on excerpts from various parts of the author’s forthcoming book *Mosque and State in Iraq 1968-2003: From Militant Secularism to Islamism*. He writes, “I am indebted to the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC) at the National Defense University, and in particular to Lorry Fenner, David Palkki and Joseph Simons for their great help and support during my research at the Center. Likewise I am grateful to Kevin Woods for his considerable help. The book is based on a combination of Ba’thi open source documents and Saddam’s secret discussions with his top officials and military officers made available to researchers at the CRRC. I am also indebted to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the US Institute of Peace. Much open-source material was collected and integrated during my fellowships there.”

² Audio recording of a closed and highly sensitive pan-Arab Leadership meeting from July 24, 1986, CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-001-167.

³ For an analysis of Ba’th ideology and practice relating to the Islamist movements in the party’s formative years see my forthcoming book, *Mosque and State in Iraq 1968-2003: From Militant Secularism to Islamism*.

The discussion was designed to establish a front against the Syrian regime with other Syrian opposition parties. The stumbling block was the Syrian MB's suggestion for a joint constitution that would explicitly state that Islam was the sole source (*al-masdar al-wahid*) of all legal authority. The Ba'this rejected it emphatically and the meeting failed. Saddam then suggested limiting the sides to strictly "private," namely, secret cooperation. This is what actually happened.⁴

However, what Saddam suggested in the PAL secret meeting in 1986 was revolutionary; he implied that he was seeking the PAL's approval to recognize the powerful and self-confident Sudanese and Egyptian MB and to treat them as equals. This could lead to Ba'th recognition of the legitimacy of or at least tolerance of the MB's concept of an Islamic state. This was absolute anathema to a party that drew its legitimacy from the teachings of Michel 'Aflaq, a staunch Christian-born secularist and presumed atheist.⁵ Saddam's initiative was the result of his feeling in 1986 that his regime needed public Islamist support. Why all of a sudden?

1986 was a terrible year for the Iraqi Ba'thi regime. It confronted an uncompromising Iran in a seemingly endless war. Iraq had just lost the Faw Peninsula, and with it the limited access it still had to the Gulf. Internationally, there was widespread speculation that Iraq was losing the war. The propaganda machine of Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini was extremely effective in portraying the Iraqi regime as atheistic, even as an enemy of Islam. The degree to which this hurt was demonstrated in the aforementioned 1986 PAL meeting when one of the participants suggested that Iraq should ask the most influential - but also most moderate - Syrian MB leaders Sa'id Hawa and 'Adnan Sa'd al-Din to go to Egypt and Sudan and save the Iraqi image. The PAL member suggested that the Syrian MB leaders would tell their counterparts in Sudan and Egypt that Michel 'Aflaq, the Ba'th founder, "[was] not an atheist (*mu mulhid*) ... and provide

⁴ CRRC, SH-SHTP-D-000-864.

⁵ For an analysis of 'Aflaq's atheism see A. Baram, *Mosque and State in Iraq 1968-2003: From Militant Secularism to Islamism*.

them with examples” from ‘Aflaq’s and Saddam’s speeches where they insist that the Ba’th are “believers” (*mu’minin*). The suggestion met with approval.⁶

Tariq ‘Aziz, the only Christian PAL member present, arrived late to the meeting. He did not hear Saddam’s opening remarks that implied that opposition to improved relations with the MB was not an option. He did not realize that he was actually responding to the boss. He thus launched a head-on assault on Saddam’s proposal. His voice sounds very tense, very agitated, and he rested his opposition on the solid ground of Saddam’s own programmatic speeches in 1977. Tariq ‘Aziz reminded his colleagues that “in the 1970s” Saddam clearly presented the party’s position regarding religion, and that this position was diametrically opposed to the position of the MB. He reminded the leadership members that while the Ba’th were committed to a “democratic national pan-Arab state” (*dawlah dimuqratiyyah qawmiyyah*), the MB were fighting for the “religious state” (*al-dawlah al-diniyyah*). ‘Aziz also reminded his colleagues that the reason why Saddam had defined the Ba’th doctrine so clearly and publicly in 1977 was so that “we had a powerful religious movement that hit us with bullets, namely, they staged armed demonstrations and hit us with bombs (*ya’ni, tutalli’u muzaharat musallaha wa gamat tadhrubu ‘alayna qanabil*), so it became imperative ... that we present against them an ideological position, in addition to mass-public and even repressive (*qam’iyyah*) steps.”⁷

This crucial discussion was not known until now. Its audio-recording is part of a treasure trove of once highly-classified Iraqi Ba’thi documents found by the US forces in Bagdad in 2003. It has been made available to researchers as part of a collection at the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC) at the National Defense University. This is the first ever archive of contemporary documents in any Arab country to become available to historians. In the field of public policy (including state-mosque relations and foreign policy) the archive does not contain groundbreaking revelations, being by definition public policies their main contours had been revealed in open-source Arabic-language documents previously. Careful examination could and did expose

⁶ CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-001-167.

⁷ Ibid., Tariq ‘Aziz around 50 minutes into the discussion. The discussion is in a mix of literary and colloquial Arabic.

these contours to historians. However, combining those open sources with the CRRC documents enriches research conclusions as it provides the insiders' unvarnished words, even though they often could not say all that was on their minds.

Tariq 'Aziz exaggerated when describing the armed activities of the Shi'i demonstrations in 1977, but he was on the mark when it came to the ideological-political threat that they represented. The demonstrations presented a dual challenge to the regime. In the first place, Shi'i masses denounced a Sunni-dominated regime. Secondly, this was also a clash between religious and secular world-views and political orders. In February 1977 Najaf and Karbala erupted in the most severe Shi'i religious riots since the Ba'th Party came to power in 1968. The regime suppressed the riots with blood and put the revolutionaries' leaders on trial.⁸ The 1977 riots threatened to split the party along sectarian lines. A head-on attack against the Shi'i Islamists would have been risky, as it could easily have been interpreted as an attack against Shi'i Islam. Such attacks were left to the regime's intellectuals in high-brow magazines, not easily available to the wider public. If coming from political leaders in the mass media, such attacks could split the party and create an unbridgeable gulf between the regime and more than half of Iraq's population. Therefore, Saddam decided on a head-on attack against Islamism of all kinds - a strategy that could unite all party activists, Shi'is as well as Sunnis. Defending secularism thus became a means to fight a dangerous competing leadership - the more radical Shi'i *'ulama* and their supporters. As the Ba'th regime was also facing difficulties with some Sunni clerics and Islamist extremists, attacking Islamism in general was a double-edged sword that cut both ways.

Therefore, in late 1977 Saddam dedicated a series of programmatic lectures to the party's doctrine on the relationship between Islam and politics. Like Michel 'Aflaq, the party founder, Saddam also dissociated himself from atheism (*al-ilhad*), but warned against any attempt to

⁸ For a description of the development of the Husayni Processions on *Yawm al-Arba'in* into a symbol of Shi'i religiosity and anti-regime protest see Amatzia Baram, "Two Roads to Revolutionary Shi'ite Fundamentalism in Iraq," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements* (Chicago, the University of Chicago Press and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1994), pp. 556-559; and A. Baram, "The Radical Shi'i Movement of Iraq" in David Menashri (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, Westview Press, 1990), pp. 140-141.

imitate the religious parties, Sunni and Shi'i alike. The Ba'th, he declared, does not mix religion and politics: "Our party is with faith (*al-iman*), but it is not a religious party, nor should it be one." Saddam defined the *shari'a* as "ancient jurisprudence," insisted that it was unsuitable for life in the modern age and warned that going Islamic would only divide Sunnis and Shi'is."⁹ Much like his mentor, 'Aflaq, he even implied that the Ba'th and its secular doctrine came to replace Islam in the modern age.¹⁰ In a more calculating way Saddam also explained that concessions to Islamist demands would inevitably lead the party to lose power because the Ba'thi's had no chance of beating the religious parties at their own game.¹¹ Saddam admitted that the majority of the Iraqis were far more traditional than the ruling party. All the same, however, he instructed the party cadres: "[Never] give up your ... leadership in ... education...Ambiguity ...should not be our means of winning over the majority."¹²

This admission that most Iraqis were opposed to the party's secular ideals was fully justified. Two years later, in February 1979, Ayat Allah Ruh Allah Khomeini came to power in Tehran. Within days Shi'i masses again started to demonstrate against the regime, expecting "an Iraqi Khomeini" to show up. Many of them saw Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr as the man of destiny. The regime cracked down ferociously on their demonstrations and executed Sadr and his sister Bint al-Huda, but it took over one year to suppress the movement.

Fortress Secularism: The Iraq-Iran War and the 8th Regional Party Congress of June 1982

Following Khomeini's rise to power, growing numbers of Iraqi citizens started to frequent the mosques not only in the Shi'i, but also in the Sunni areas. When Saddam launched a fully-

⁹ Saddam's 1977 lecture "A View of Religion and Heritage," in his *On History, Heritage and Religion* (Baghdad, Translation and Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1981), pp. 24, 27-29. For his negative view on the application of the *shari'a*, see pp. 29. See also Hasan Tawalba (editor), *Muqtatafat min ahadith Saddam Husayn* (Quotations from the Talks of Saddam Husayn) (Beirut, Dar al-Tali'a, 1979), pp. 175-186. An identical approach is expressed in early 1980 by *Al-Thawra al-Arabiyya*, the internal party organ, disseminated to members only, when it attacked Khomeini's Islam. See "*Al-Ilmaniyya wa Jawhar al-Mawqif al-Ba'thi Min al-Din*" (Secularism and the Essence of the Ba'thi Position on Religion), in the issue of July 1980, pp.13-18.

¹⁰ Saddam Husayn, "On Writing History," in *On History, Heritage and Religion*, pp. 13

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 30-31.

¹² Saddam Husayn, "A View of Religion and Heritage," in *On History, Heritage and Religion*, pp. 25, 35. See also pp. 37.

fledged military offensive against Khomeini's Iran in September 1980 he did this, among other reasons, to deal a death blow to – or at least to humiliate - the main source of inspiration for the Iraqi Shi'i revolutionaries, but also to nip the growing Sunni religiosity in the bud. As long as it seemed that the military campaign was proceeding well there was no need for soul searching, but in 1981 things had already begun to change: the Iraqi armed forces were stuck in Khuzestan-Arabestan. Following the Iraqis' devastating defeat at Khorramshahr and Abadan in May 1982 and the unilateral Iraqi withdrawal from most of the Iranian territories that followed, Khomeini's prestige was at its zenith. The defeat of Iraqi armed forces meant for many in Iraq that something was also very wrong with the ruling party and its ideology, and very right with Khomeini's Islamism. Suddenly, some 60 years after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, when the last Sword of Islam was broken, the Iraqis began again to identify Islam with power. The years between 1979 and 1982 were the first time under Ba'th rule that even many Sunnis – including party members – began to show signs of growing religiosity. Like in 1977, Saddam felt the need to shore up the morale of party members and stop the sliding toward Islamism. He did this by convening the Eighth Regional Iraqi Party Congress of June 1982.

A very central theme in the resolutions of the Party Congress was “the religious phenomenon.” The resolutions were very surprising: for the first time in the history of the Iraqi party they frankly discussed the nature of the Iraqi people and the Islamization of Iraqi society, especially Shi'i society. The Congress deplored the rise of “ultra-religiosity” (*al-tadayyun*) amongst the Iraqi youth in general and the Shi'a in particular and ascribed it to the defeats of the pan-Arab movement. The Iraqi character, the Congress concluded, is traditionally “loaded with extreme sentiments and reactions.” These negative sentiments were directed by the Shi'i Da'wa Islamic Party against the Ba'th revolution in the form of religious hate. In this way, the “wicked” religious circles were taking advantage of “the anxiety and tension” that was typical of some Iraqi youth because of recent upheavals. The party admitted that the regime was vulnerable mainly due to ideological confusion:

Some of the party members started to practice religious ceremonies in a demonstrative ... way. Gradually the religious ideology won over party doctrine... Pushed by the wish to emulate the more senior party members and the impression that this trend is expected by

the leadership ... some members [even] placed the performance of religious ceremonies as a yardstick for party activity ... [T]he spread of these practices ... created a state of confusion in party ranks.¹³

The party was shocked; in the mosques young Ba'athi members who met with Islamist activists and were at the risk of being converted to Islamism. The Resolutions implied that parts of the leadership, apparently mainly senior Shi'i members, anticipated defeat to Khomeini's Iran and were already hedging their bets. Saddam, even if he had wanted to in 1982, was unable to make any public concessions to Islamic fundamentalists because such concessions, made in a moment of a crushing defeat for his armed forces, would have been seen as a sign of weakness and surrender. The result could have been total disintegration of the regime's structure in the south, where it rested largely on Shi'i collaborators. A decade or so later, in the early 1990s after Khomeini admitted defeat and then died, Saddam could afford concessions to Islam.

In 1993, when Iraq felt the full brunt of the international embargo, Saddam announced the opening of his Faith Campaign. Since then, historians of the Ba'ath regime have begun to ask themselves when the party's metamorphosis from secularism to Islamism had begun and how? The "why" was easier to suggest; the public's religiosity was growing because of growing hardships. The effect of two devastating wars and huge socio-economic dislocations was exacerbated by the international embargo. Runaway inflation and close to 50% unemployment devastated the Iraqi middle and lower middle class. As a result people sought solace in visits to the mosque. A young Iraqi explained, "We feel we need support, we need peace, so we pray ... Everybody seeks a refuge somewhere... I turned to God."¹⁴ The regime decided to jump on the bandwagon. This was made clear to a visitor by a senior party official.¹⁵ However, there had to be some serious discussions before such a U-turn was performed; Saddam could browbeat the party's PAL and the Iraqi Regional Leadership (RL), but he could not bypass them.

¹³ Hizb al-Ba'ath al-Arabi al-Ishtiraki, al-Qutr al-Iraqi, *al-Taqrir al-Markazi lil-Mu'tamar al-Qutri al-Tasi', Haziran, 1982* (The Central Report of the 9th Regional [Iraqi] Congress, June 1982) (Baghdad, January 1983), pp. 293-8. The quotation, pp. 299-300.

¹⁴ Kim Ghattas, "Iraqis seek refuge in religion: Regime has co-opted growing religious mood," *BBC*, April 25, 2002, in *Washington Kurdish Institute*, April 26, 2002. See below for details about the mosque-building policy in the 1990s.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The newly-released secret audio recording of the PAL meeting in 1986 provides at least part of the answer. This meeting represented the first decision to depart from the party's traditional secular doctrine. Clearly, this was an agonizing decision for the party luminaries. Even though the participants understood that they could not reject Saddam's "proposal" to befriend the MB, they grappled with it and spewed much hate for and fear of the MB. They seemed to understand that a truce, possibly an alliance with outside Islamists, would lead to a profound change at home too. One of them said, "We are approaching making a decision on strategy for decades" (*wadh' istratijiyyah li 'asharat al-sinin*). They were fully aware that the MB saw in Khomeini's Iran – Iraq's lethal enemy – a positive model. Tariq 'Aziz warned that the result of this strategy may well be that "we [the secular nationalists] shall lose Egypt and the Sudan" to the "religious trend" (*al-tayar al-dini*).¹⁶ It seems that he meant also the loss of Iraq. Indeed, fourteen years later, in 2000, Saddam's half-brother Barzan Ibrahim Hasan al-Tikriti expressed similar fears. He wrote in his secret Baghdad diary, now available at the CRRC: "The alliance with the religious trends ... is a true mistake because the Ba'th texture and modern thinking cannot be married to the religious thinking. ... I told the president of the danger of alliance with the religious trend." The price for such a policy, Barzan warned Saddam, would be that "the religious trend will achieve power after it removed him [Saddam]."¹⁷

Back in the 1986 PAL meeting 'Aziz saw no difference between Iranian and Arab Islamists – he hated and feared both. Saddam admitted that the Islamists were pretty unpleasant: "When an unveiled woman is walking they torture her (*timshi safirah yu'adhdhibuha*)," and threaten to sue her in court. Saddam added with disdain, "They are morally corrupt (*fasidin*) even before they achieved power" and they have no real doctrine or "innovative method" that can even come close to that of the Ba'th. All they know is "to read the Qur'an from cover to cover and say 'This is my doctrine' (*hadhihi 'aqidati*)! This is no innovation! Life cannot gain anything from this!" Saddam added, "Among the people they are the most dictatorial ... they consider you weak and

¹⁶ An audio recording from July 24, 1986, CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-001-167, mainly 01:22:00 to the end.

¹⁷ CRRC, SH-MISC-D-000-950, pp. 66-67. The last entry was introduced on October 21, 2000.

they devour you” (*hum akthar nas diktaturiyyin humma! ... istad’afuka wa akaluka!*). A particular target for their hate and fear was Hasan al-Turabi, the leader of the Sudanese MB. ‘Aziz warned that Turabi “wants to rule the Sudan” and is not likely to “relinquish his ideological struggle,” so how, he wondered, can the Ba’th branch in the Sudan relinquish their struggle? And yet, when summing up the meeting Saddam insisted that the party could gain more by befriending the MB than by antagonizing them.¹⁸ Three years later Turabi supported an Islamist military *coup d’état* in the Sudan. Yet, following the Gulf War in July 1991, Turabi sat in front of Saddam in Baghdad and with amazing “khutzpah” suggested that Iraq too must go Islamist.¹⁹

Fortress Secularism? The First Cracks

That something strange was happening in Baghdad became evident to the public already when, in June 1989, Baghdad announced the death of Ba’th Party founder Michel ‘Aflaq. The Pan-Arab Leadership of the party published a communiqué that left many party members speechless:

The late ‘Aflaq... embraced Islam as his religion [prior to his death]. He and his comrades in the command did not want to announce this, out of...concern that this option would be given a political interpretation.²⁰

Had the party not wanted to give it “a political interpretation,” they could simply have refrained from any mention of this highly significant conversion. A Western ambassador who served in Iraq at the time disclosed that ‘Aflaq’s elder son said that he was unaware of his father’s conversion.²¹ There were additional signs that the Ba’th regime was going Islamic. For example, Saddam’s January 1991 decision to introduce the words “*allahu akbar*” to the Iraqi national flag preparation for the Gulf War. Some additional *Shari’ah*-lite measures, were also introduced. For example, in 1991 the government established the Iraqi Islamic Bank.²² In the same vein, in

¹⁸ An audio recording from July 24, 1986, CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-001-167, mainly 01:22:00 to the end.

¹⁹ An audio recording of the meeting between Saddam and Turabi on July 18, 1991, CRRC, SH-SPPC-D-000-217.

²⁰ *Baghdad Voice of the Masses in Arabic*, June 24, 1989, in *FBIS-NES*, June 26, 1989, pp. 10.

²¹ Interview, Tel Aviv, March 29, 1995.

²² *Al-Iraq*, Oct. 26, 1992.

October 1991 the RCC decided to deduce from taxable income any sum donated to the poor according to the Islamic principle of *Zakat*.²³

Enter Saddam's Faith Campaign

In mid-June 1993 Saddam announced the launching of a Faith Campaign.²⁴ The Campaign introduced major changes in the life of all Iraqis. In September 1993 the Ministry of the Interior closed down 29 out of Baghdad's total of 45 night clubs and all but five discothèques. The remaining such institutions were limited to five areas in the capital: Liberation (*Tahrir*) and Aviators' (*Tayran*) Squares, Abu Nuwas and Nidhal Streets, and a street leading to the military camp of al-Rashid. The Iraqi president knew that outlawing spirits altogether would cause outrage even in a dispirited and tamed Ba'th party and military. Therefore, he never tried to ban the sale of liquors. However, the *public consumption* of alcohol was banned in all parts of Iraq, punishable by one month of imprisonment.²⁵ In the Holy Shi'i cities and the Sunni quarter of A'zamiyya, where important mosques were to be found, spirits of all kinds were completely out of bounds. Only non-Muslims were allowed to sell spirits. Liquor stores were not allowed within 150 meters of mosques, schools and hospitals and, strangely, such stores had to bear "Iraqi or Arab names."²⁶

Qur'an Teaching

The regime immediately launched a massive campaign, designed to turn the study of the Qur'an and *Hadith* into a national intellectual focus. The teaching of party doctrine, written in the wooden Ba'th Arabic, now competed with the poetry of the Qur'an with surprising results. The reason was clear: a few theological reservations on the part of the Shi'ah notwithstanding, the

²³ *Al-Qadisiyya*, Oct. 29, 1991. For more information about the sums collected by the *Zakat* and how they were distributed see, for example, *al-Thawra*, March 27,30 1992; *al-Iraq*, March 11, 1992.

²⁴ *Babil*, June 16, 1994. For the actual beginning of Qur'an classes for teachers see "Koranic Teaching Program in Schools Explained," *al-'Iraq*, Aug 28, 1993 p 5, in *JPRS-NEA-93-112 30 93AE0623A*, November 1993. For the opening in Najaf one year later see *Babil*, Aug. 1, 1994.

²⁵ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, September 11, 1993. See also Decree No.82 of July 7, 1994, *Al-Thawra*, July 8, 1994, very conspicuously on the front page.

²⁶ *Al-Thawra*, Aug. 20, 1994. See also instructions by the Minister of the Interior, Watban Ibrahim Hasan, Saddam's half-brother, *al-Thawra*, July 10, 1994.

Qur'an has been accepted throughout the ages by both sects as the foundation of the faith. Opening salvos preceded the Faith Campaign. In mid-1990 the Saddam Center for the Reciting of the Qur'an was established at the [Sunni] Imam al-A'zam Mosque in Baghdad. Its graduates were to supervise Qur'an reciting courses in mosques all over Iraq.²⁷ Furthermore, from that year Qur'an reciting courses were given to male and female high school students during the summer break and only in mosques.²⁸ By the summer of 1992 reportedly some 60,000 students took Qur'an memorizing courses in mosques, given by the Center's teachers and graduates.²⁹ This was unheard of in Iraqi history - it not only gave Qur'an reciting an unprecedented place in the educational system, it also placed students at the mosques for months at the expense of their holiday, precisely what the 8th Party Congress endeavored to prevent. In August 1992, the president instructed the Ministry of Education to make sure that every teacher would go through a new examination, testing his/her knowledge of Islam.³⁰ In a subsequent meeting between Saddam and educators to discuss primary and secondary education, Saddam instructed the teachers to start teaching Qur'an right from the first grade of primary school.³¹ The results were bizarre – parents complained that the choice of *ayahs* was idiotic, the newly-recruited teachers taught the six years olds about issues of personal status and about the fires of Hell, and as a result the children were utterly confused and suffered from nightmares.³²

By June 1994 the Ministry of Awqaf had already produced 60,000 new Qur'an books.³³ Since Qur'an studies was greatly expanded in all schools,³⁴ this required a quantum leap in the number of teachers of the Qur'an, a particularly difficult subject for teachers with no suitable background in the field. These studies had been intentionally neglected under Ba'ath rule and, due to its low status, few teachers chose to specialize in it. The Ministry of Education leaped to the rescue. It

²⁷ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, June 19, 1993.

²⁸ *Al-Thawra*, Nov. 17, 1991.

²⁹ *Al-Thawra*, Nov. 17, 1991; July 29, 1992.

³⁰ *Al-Thawra*, Aug. 17, 1992.

³¹ *Al-Qadisiyya*, April 6, 1993.

³² For example, Ma'sum Sa'di, in *Alif Ba*, March 2, 1994, pp. 16-18; Nabil 'Abd al-Qadir, *al-Thawra*, January 9, 1994.

³³ *Babil*, June 16, 18, 1994.

³⁴ *Al-Qadisiyya*, July 31, 1994.

immediately announced that it intended to quickly prepare 30,000 Qur'an and Islam teachers.³⁵ The academic level of the new recruits, though, was embarrassing. Up through December 1993, only 11,500 male and female Qur'an teachers were reportedly adequately prepared to instruct in the subject.³⁶ The president ordered that Qur'an and religion teachers be given a monthly allowance of 100-150 dinars over and above their regular salary.³⁷ This step elevated Qur'an teachers above all others, and turned them into a subject of envy, as it apparently redeemed Qur'an classes from their perennial inferiority in the eyes of the students. In order to turn Qur'an studies into a prestigious subject the Ministry of Education also included those studies in the general matriculation examination, an unprecedented decision. The universities, a bastion of traditional Ba'thi ideology, objected, but to no avail.³⁸

Senior clerics, both Shi'is and Sunnis, enthusiastically supported the president's initiative.³⁹ It is not clear to what extent their enthusiasm was genuine, but maybe it was; after all, for both sects the Qur'an represented the foundation of the faith. No less importantly, the Qur'an courses and their enhanced centrality in Iraq's education and socio-cultural life provided a major boost to the status of the *'ulama* as well as their material well-being. Likewise, the need for Qur'an teachers became so great that professional clerics and even junior students of religion became a hot commodity in the educational job market. With the highest salaries in the system, they had little to complain about. This was one more reason for Saddam to initiate the campaign; in the aforementioned 1986 closed-door meeting of the PAL he observed that the popularity and influence of the *'ulama* had just undergone a quantum leap.⁴⁰ During the Faith Campaign he acted upon it; by upgrading their socio-economic status he could hope to buy off the Shi'i as well as the Sunni clerics.

³⁵ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, July 13, 1993.

³⁶ *Al-Qadisiyya*, December 12, 1993.

³⁷ *Republic of Iraq Radio Network in Arabic*, October 11, 1993, in *FBIS-NES*, Oct. 13, 1993, pp. 45. See also *Babil*, Oct. 12, 1993.

³⁸ *Babil*, June 1, 1994.

³⁹ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, June 23, 1993. Particular names mentioned in support in this issue: Husayn al-Musawi, the *Murshid* (Guide) of al-Kazimiyya [Shi'i] Mosque, 'Abd Allah al-Shaykhali, imam and preacher of al-Imam al-A'zam [Sunni] Mosque, and others.

⁴⁰ CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-001-167.

Qur'an Study and the Party Elite

In the mid-1990s a notebook belonging to a low-level party member surfaced in which he had dutifully repeated and copied the party principles that he and all other Ba'this' had been taught. In this recitation of the Ba'th core principles is found an explanation for the imposition of Qur'an studies on the party's senior membership. Among the reasons given, he was told that "what led the leadership [read: Saddam] to teach the Holy Qur'an to the senior cadres (*al-kadr al-mutaqaddam*) [of the party]" was the intention that "it will be a [guiding] light in their work as well as in deepening the faith (*ta'miq al-iman*) thus boosting ... the inherited spiritual values (*al-qiyam al-ruhiyya*) and the profound meanings of this eternal legacy (*al-turath al-khalid*)."⁴¹ The other reasons given were just as foggy and grandiloquent, and they all indicated that party ideals were no longer sufficient. This imposition began with the party's top echelon in order to set an example, but, as the notebook shows, eventually it reached the lowest levels of party membership.

In a private meeting with a minor Sudanese cabinet minister in 2002 Saddam made a humiliating effort to impress his Islamist guest with his born-again Islamic conversion. "Because the [Faith] Campaign went very smoothly," Saddam complained, "our Arab and Muslim brothers did not notice the extent of the upheaval (*al-inqilab*) that we [read: I] caused in the life of the Iraqi people."⁴² And he went into the details with a vengeance:

Our pupils and students study religion from the first grade of primary school to the end of high school. All the judges (*al-qudhat*) have learned the Prophet's Tradition (*al-sunnah al-nabawiyyah*) and the Blessed Qur'an, and anyone who failed (the final examination) was excluded from the bench. And the same applied to the top cadre of the state and the party (*kadir al-dawlah wal-hizb*) and according to the level of the results [of the tests] the fate of each of them is being decided. And the latest issue we [read: I] decided about is that the big merchants (*al-tujar*) will study the jurisprudence of the *shar'i* inter-human instructions (*fiqh al-mu'ammalat*) and that they will be examined and their fate, too, will be decided according to the results.⁴³

⁴¹ CRRC, SH-BATH-D-000-474. No precise date is provided, but the context implies the timing.

⁴² CRRC, SH-PDWN-D-000-409, pp. 23. The meeting took place between April 27 and May 7, 2002. See also CRRC, SH-PDWN-D-000-812, pp. 195.

⁴³ CRRC, SH-PDWN-D-000-409, no pages in the Arabic text, pp. 21 in the English text; between April 27 and May 7, 2002.

Indeed, a mere few days before Saddam's private meeting with the Sudanese minister, the Iraqi president announced to his government its decision regarding the merchants and, apparently, other businessmen.⁴⁴ This decision was apparently made in preparation for his meeting with the Sudanese guest, but forcing the party's luminaries to study the Qur'an and go through tests came much earlier, probably in 1996. On July 20, 1998 'Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, Saddam's number two, and many cabinet ministers participated in a celebration to mark the end of the 3rd graduating Faith Class (*al-Dawra al-Imaniyya*) of the most senior party leadership at Saddam's Higher Institute for the Study of the Blessed Qur'an and the Prophet's Esteemed Sunnah (*Ma'had Saddam al-'Ali li dirasat al-Qur'an al-Karim wal Sunna al-Nabawiyya al-Sharifa*). The celebration was a part of the "Great Patriotic Faith Campaign" that was "ordered and led" by the "Historical Leader Saddam Hussein." As explained by a senior party official, the Institute "represents a special, clear and unique area in deepening the understanding (*al-fahm al-imani*) of the great Ba'th faith." This way, he pointed out, the senior party members "are emphasizing the eternal Ba'th system of being inspired by the principle of faith from its first sources: from the spirit of the Monotheistic Islam." One of the graduates emphasized that the course, by teaching him Qur'an and Sunna, deepened "the original aspects of the party's principle."⁴⁵ When Michel 'Aflaq used a similar terminology he meant that Islam was an historical memory, while the secular party ideology was the answer to the needs of the Arabs in the modern age.⁴⁶ Now, however, it was clear to all that party ideology was out and Islam was in. Indeed, in January 1995, in a closed-door meeting of the PAL, Saddam hammered the last nail into the coffin of party ideology when he announced that the Ba'th were no longer against the principle of a state that would unite all the Muslim world, provided that unification would begin with pan-Arab

⁴⁴ See Saddam's meeting with his government on April 21, 2002, CRRC, SH-PDWN-D-000-409, English text pp. 23.

⁴⁵ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, July 21, 1998.

⁴⁶ For an analysis of 'Aflaq's teachings on state-mosque relations see my forthcoming book *Mosque and State in Iraq 1968-2003: From Militant Secularism to Islamism*.

unity.⁴⁷ This was in fact the original position of the Egyptian MB under the leadership of Hasan al-Banna. The secular, language-based national state was dead.

Mosques or Butter?

In a country devastated by two wars and a massive revolt in which family homes were destroyed and in which much of the infrastructure was ruined, in a country under a severe international embargo, since 1991 a huge construction effort was directed toward the establishment of new mosques and religious institutions. The most elaborate mosques were the super-expensive President Leader/Commander Friday Mosques (*Jami' al-Ra'is al-Qa'id*), built mostly in Sunni governorates.⁴⁸ Probably the most ambitious of those mosques was the Baghdad Mother of All Battles Mosque (*Jami' Umm al-Ma'arik*). The cornerstone was laid in 1993,⁴⁹ and the construction was completed in 2001. The mosque's structure was brimming with defiant anti-American symbolism but also with references to Saddam's biography. One feature intrinsically linked with Saddam was the mosque's special Qur'an. "Over three years," reported a senior mosque functionary, "the president gave us a total of 28 liters of his own blood, which has been mixed with chemicals to produce [the ink for the mosque's] hand-written Qur'an of 605 pages."⁵⁰ Following the downfall of the Ba'th regime the name was changed to *Umm al-Qura* (The Mother of All Villages, the ancient name of Mecca). In May 1994, Saddam decided to embark on an ambitious and super-expensive project to establish the Great State Mosque (*jami' al-dawla al-kabir*), meant to be one of the biggest in the world, on the grounds of the Horsemanship Club (*nadi al-Furusiyya*) in al-Mansur quarter at the heart of Baghdad. It was supposed to have a prayer space for 20,000 people. The Mosque, Saddam explained, ought to be "commensurate with Baghdad's pan-Arab and spiritual place" in the eyes of the Arabs and

⁴⁷ Saddam in a closed-door discussion of the PAL on January 25, 1995, CRRC, SH-SPPC-000-660.

⁴⁸ *Al-Qadisiyya*, May 27, 1993.

⁴⁹ See a cornerstone ceremony for a similar mosque in al-Salman, in Muthanna Governorate in the south, *Al-Thawra*, April 19, 1993.

⁵⁰ Philip Smucker from Baghdad, *The Daily Telegraph*, London, July 29, 2001. See also Kim Ghattas, "Iraqis seek refuge in religion: Regime has co-opted growing religious mood," *BBC* April 25, 2002, in *Washington Kurdish Institute*, April 26, 2002.

Muslims.⁵¹ The president also instructed the *Furusiyya* Club to stop all bets, as betting went contrary to “our deep-rooted Arab [read: Islamic] traditions.”⁵² The gigantic mosque was never completed. This did not mean that the regime neglected the less extravagant projects of building and renovating mosques – many scores of mosques, mostly in the Sunni areas, were promised and quite a few were in fact built, some in honor of Saddam’s lieutenants.⁵³ The clerics were not neglected either. To celebrate the Ba’th Party’s birthday, in 1992 the president allotted 283 plots of land primarily for Muslim clerics, but set aside some for Christian leaders as well.⁵⁴

Even before the Faith Campaign, in November 1989, Saddam University for Islamic Studies (*Jami'at Saddam lil-'Ulum al-Islamiyya*) was established.⁵⁵ The subjects studied were Arabic language, Qur’an sciences, jurisprudence and “Islamic thinking,” designed to undercut the opposition Sunni-Salafi trends. The most important faculty was the one dedicated to *fiqh* (Jurisprudence). A decade later, in the presence of most of the top leadership, the university celebrated the graduation of its sixth class.⁵⁶ Saddam saw the university as his prize Islamic project. He allocated substantial sums for it, the best-known professors and academically-inclined clerics were recruited and their salaries were the highest for professorial employees in the land. The student-teacher ratio (around 30 students per professor) was one of the best, if not the best in the fields of the humanities and social studies. Saddam University for Islamic Studies was a small institution: in the academic year 1992-1993 it had only three buildings, 26 faculty and 764 students (including 126 from other Islamic, mainly Arab states), but the students were hand-picked and, with a select teaching staff and generous budgets, it was, indeed, an elite school.⁵⁷ When the president of the university needed funds he could go directly to the very top

⁵¹ *Al-Thawra*, May 16, 1994; *Al-'Iraq*, May 21, 1994; *Al-Qadisiyya*, Nov. 4, 1987.

⁵² *Al-Thawra*, May 18, 1994.

⁵³ See, for example, a mosque named after 'Izzat Ibrahim, Deputy Chairman of the RCC and Deputy Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, in his home town of Dur, *al-'Iraq*, February 20, 1992. For much more see A. Baram, *Mosque and State in Iraq 1968-2003: From Militant Secularism to Islamism*.

⁵⁴ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, April 7, 1992.

⁵⁵ *Al-Thawra*, November 23, 1992.

⁵⁶ *Al-Qadisiyya*, June 28, 1998. See also *Al-'Iraq*, March 2, 1992; *Al-Thawra*, Jan. 24, 1993.

⁵⁷ See, for example, *INA*, Oct. 14, 1992, in *FBIS-NES*, Oct. 14, 1992; *Al-Tawra*, January 24, 1993, and interviews with Iraqi officials in Washington, DC, summer 2004. Children of regime luminaries attended too, thus indicating

and receive all that he needed.⁵⁸ To prepare a suitable student body, beginning in 1991 every year ten new middle and high school *madrasahs* were opened in the Sunni areas.⁵⁹ This, too, provided many well-paying new jobs for Sunni *'ulama*. The best graduates could continue their studies at Saddam University for Islamic Studies.⁶⁰ This way the regime was preparing the next generation of Sunni mosque preachers and imams.

The regime did not neglect the Shi'i aspect as well. On the ideological and emotional levels since 1979 Saddam demonstrated in his public speeches as well as in his private meetings his wholehearted support for the first and third Shi'i Imams in their historical battles against their enemies whom the Sunnis regard as legitimate rulers.⁶¹ He also made remarkable efforts to persuade his listeners that the differences between the Sunnah and the Shi'ah were insignificant.⁶² Material support was extended mainly to the central shrines, and far less so to ordinary mosques, *husayniyyat* and *madrasahs* in the south. The idea was still to make sure that control was easier by channeling the masses to central places. To begin with, much as he disliked them, Saddam had great respect for the Shi'i clerics' popularity. Already following the demonstrations of February 1977, the regime issued a new Law of the Service of Men of Religion, turning them all into government officials, with a rise in salaries between 50% and 100% and all the social benefits involved.⁶³ Many *'ulama* were either lured or coerced (or both) to express support for the regime.⁶⁴

the great prestige of the university. See a lecture by a student Ibrahim 'Izzat Ibrahim, son of the Deputy Chairman of the RCC and Deputy Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, *Al-Qadisiyya*, March 16, 1993.

⁵⁸ See, for example, his request to 'Udayy Saddam Husayn for help and 'Udayy's contribution of IQD 100,000 toward scholarships, *al-Thawra*, March 31, 1993. Many more Islamic institutions were established. See A. Baram, *Mosque and State in Iraq 1968-2003: From Militant Secularism to Islamism*.

⁵⁹ For example *Al-'Iraq*, Dec. 10, 1991; *Al-Thawra*, July 30, 1992.

⁶⁰ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, June 19, 1993.

⁶¹ See, for example, his meeting with Shi'i tribal shaykhs in Saddam City (Baghdad) in late 1991, CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-000-891.

⁶² For details see A. Baram, *Mosque and State in Iraq 1968-2003: From Militant Secularism to Islamism*.

⁶³ *Al-Jumhuriyya*, Saturday supplement, Aug. 20, 1977

⁶⁴ See for example high-profile support for the president in his just war against "the hostile Iranian enemy" by Shi'i clergy in Najaf, *al-Jumhuriyya*, Feb. 19, 1984. And see a government appointee made Grand Ayat Allah, 'Abd al-Karim Aal 'Ali Khan al-Madani and his son, *Al-Thawra*, May 5, 1991.

Government support for the main Shi'i shrines was an important element in the effort to normalize its relations with the community it had just devastated, but it also fitted well into the president's Faith Campaign. In the Shi'i anti-Ba'thi revolt of March 1991 the revolutionaries took shelter in the shrines of Najaf and Karbala and the religious schools around them. The regime had no qualms bombarding the buildings. The damage was extensive, and something had to be done about it. The community itself started repairs, and the regime joined in. The media gave wide publicity to the president's personal interest and contribution. The reconstruction included gilding parts of the shrines' domes, contributions of "expensive chandeliers," fixing the glazed colored tiles on the outside walls and laying marble tiles on the floors, as well as many other massive repairs and improvements. In the mid-1990s the president allocated close to a ton of pure gold for the repairs and far larger quantities of pure silver. Such expensive contributions were made throughout the 1990s almost every year, and they included repairs and refurbishing of *madrasahs* and development of pilgrimage support sites.⁶⁵ Albeit on a far smaller scale than in the Sunni areas and Baghdad, the regime also renovated some mosques and tombs of Shi'i lesser saints and even built some brand-new mosques.⁶⁶ Just as importantly, as emerges from numerous interviews, between 1993 and 2003 the intelligence bodies tolerated more frequent visits to the mosque than they ever had before.

Brutality Reigns Supreme

The Faith Campaign also had a sinister side. In a cabinet meeting in August 1994 Saddam admitted that his humanism was misplaced when he at first rejected his "leadership[']s" suggestion to do as the Qur'an orders: "Cut off the hand of the male and female thief" (*iqta'u yad al-sariq wal-sariqah*).⁶⁷ The "leadership" also suggested non-Islamic punishments – a

⁶⁵ *Al-'Iraq*, Sept. 2, 1991; *Babil*, October 6, 1991; *Al-Qadisiyya*, January 20, 1992; *Al-Thawra*, Feb. 23, 1992; *Al-Qadisiyya*, March 1, 1992; *Al-Tawra*, July 1, 1992; *Al-Thawra*, April 15, 1992. On opening three new gates in the Friday Mosque of Sadiq al-Sadr in Kufa see *Babil*, Oct. 14, 1993; *Al-Qadisiyya*, May 19, 1994. See also the report of a visit to Karbala by John Lancaster, *The Washington Post*, February 16, 1995; *Alif Ba*, March 6, 1996, pp. 7; *Al-Qadisiyya*, Dec. 23, 1996, and more.

⁶⁶ For example *Al-'Iraq*, Sept. 16, 1993; *Al-Thawra*, Feb. 18, 1994; *Al-Jumhuriyya*, March 30, 1994.

⁶⁷ CRRC, SH-SPPC-D-000-448, pp. 9-11. The meeting took place on August 21, 1994. The Qur'an says: "As to the thief, both male or female, cut off their hands..." (*Surah* No. 5, *al-Ma'ida*, Verse 38).

deserter would have his ear cut off, and if he deserted again he would lose a second ear. The mutilations were to be performed with a knife, apparently on the spot in battlefield conditions. Saddam initially objected because “I knew that we shall kill between five and six thousand persons [this way].” But eventually he relented because, as he put it, like God he realized that, without punishments serving as a deterrent, many people would misbehave. Saddam explained to his ministers God created Heaven, but this did not suffice, so He then created Hell as well, and so did Saddam, together with draconian punishments in this world. The president reported that the new law was a great success as thousands of army deserters immediately reported for duty. He was happy to hear from a minister that the gory punishments were displayed on TV to increase the deterrence value.⁶⁸

Indeed, The Revolutionary Command Council Decree No. 59 of June 4, 1994 was the first in a host of *shar’i* laws to be introduced, and as a result the Iraqi Penal Code was largely transformed. According to the new law, with very few exceptions the punishment for robbery and car theft would be amputation of the hand at the wrist. “In case of repetition the left foot should be amputated at the ankle.”⁶⁹ A few days after the first enactment the government decided that unauthorized money changers were, in fact, thieves and as such they should be punished in the same way.⁷⁰ Decree 92 of July 21, 1994 stipulated that forgers of official documents shall be punishable by life-imprisonment or amputation.⁷¹ By July 1994 the amputation of the right hand was applied to a wider variety of cases, such as profiteering bakers.⁷² To differentiate between a war hero and a common thief, both having lost a hand or a leg, on August 18, 1994 the RCC issued Decree 109 to the effect that any thief whose hand was amputated “shall be tattooed between his eyebrows.” As befitting a civilized regime, the amputation by knife and branding were to be replaced by hospital operations.⁷³

⁶⁸ CRRC, SH-SPPC-D-000-448, pp. 9-11.

⁶⁹ *Republic of Iraq Radio Network in Arabic*, June 4, 1994, in *FBIS-SERIAL JN0406194294*, June 4, 1994.

⁷⁰ *Republic of Iraq Radio Network in Arabic*, June 13, 1994, in *FBIS-SERIAL JN1306125394*, June 13, 1994.

⁷¹ Decree Number 92 of July 21, 1994, *Al-Thawra*, July 24, 1994, in *FBIS Serial JN3007140294*, July 30, 1994.

⁷² *Al-Jumhuriyya*, July 6, 1994.

⁷³ *Al-Thawra*, August 26, 1990, in *FBIS-SERIAL JN 0109143394*, Sept. 1, 1994.

The Party's "Revolt": Is Baghdad Becoming Riyadh?

In all the sources available, be it in the Iraqi public media or in closed-door leadership discussions, no opposition to the enforcement of the study of the Qur'an and the Sunnah can be found, and the same is true with the draconian punishment system either. In fact, it seems that the latter was received with satisfaction by party and state officials. Saddam's elder son 'Uday, who owned a newspaper, a magazine and a TV station was, in fact, conspicuous among the supporters of the amputation and execution laws. 'Uday's enthusiasm for draconian punishments was further demonstrated when he complained that an existing law, according to which a "madam" of a house of ill repute (bayt al-da'ara) ought to be executed, had never been applied and he demanded real-life death sentences and executions.⁷⁴ Indeed, on August 27, 1994 the RCC enacted Decree 118, repeating a previous decree punishing by death anyone "organizing a group" for prostitution.⁷⁵ 'Uday's lust for blood was not satisfied before he demanded killing adulteresses (though not adulterers) as this would "reflect our age-old Iraqi family tradition, which makes us, as Iraqis, stand out among our [Arab] brethren."⁷⁶

The attitude toward the limits on entertainment, betting and the banning of public consumption of alcohol was very different. Since they came to power in 1968 the senior party officials would often drink in private meetings, as well as in social clubs like the 'Alwiya, the Hunting Club (*Nadi al-Sayd*) and the Horsemanship. Military officers, too, used to drink when meeting socially, for example, in the Air Force Sports Club, in the Navy Club (*al-nadi al-bahri*) and the Army Club (*al-nadi al-'askari*). From the interviews, it emerges that this kind of social drinking at the top of the party leadership and in the military officers' corps continued until 2003. And yet, the middle-level party members who could not afford the exclusive clubs were boiling. Many senior members were deeply concerned by additional aspects of the Faith Campaign.

⁷⁴ "Abu Sirhan," *Babil*, June 5, 1994.

⁷⁵ *Al-Thawra*, Sept. 4, 1994, *FBIS-SERIAL JN1309162594*, Sept. 13, 1994. Law 8 of 1988 already defined what "prostitution" was.

⁷⁶ "Abu Sirhan," *Babil* June 5, 1994.

This concern was given voice by the only person in Iraq who could write against the president's policy with impunity. One year into the Faith Campaign 'Udayy's daily came out with a sensational leading article. It warned that any attempt to plant an alien fundamentalist "Islamic heart" in a "pan-Arab [secular] body" would inevitably lead to the body's death. Iraq's "enemies" were asking in happy anticipation, "does this mean that we [the Iraqis] will put on veils and that [Harun] al-Rashid's Baghdad with all its history and its various sects will turn into a city similar to Saudi ones?"⁷⁷ Going Islamic, 'Uday warned, may create divisions amongst the various Islamic (Sunni and Shi'i) sects, while religious pluralism was Iraq's lifeline. "Whatever attire the Islamic [fundamentalist] trend dons in Iraq, [it] will bring us disaster because we are not one Islamic sect or community," 'Udayy cautioned. Finally, much like his father in 1977, 'Udayy warned that whatever the party did to demonstrate its political tilt towards Islam would not be accepted as legitimate by the Islamic fundamentalists and thus the whole effort was in vain.⁷⁸

'Udayy was also the only one who could express the concern of party members regarding Saddam's embrace of radical Islamist elements. In 1994 his newspaper *Babil* published a letter it allegedly received from an anonymous worried citizen in which the author explained the danger of a burgeoning "Wahhabi" movement in Iraq led by one, Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani. The movement was reportedly receiving financial support from Saudi Arabia. They managed to influence the youth and "even our old people," the citizen complained, and their poisonous ideas would lead to civil war. They used the mosques to spread their heresies and they also penetrated into the Iraqi theological colleges. Most 'ulama did not dare confront them out of fear or due to bribery. They were, however, easy to identify because they all wore the same clothes and looked similar. This meant that they all obeyed orders from one center. "The party and security organs do not seem to be aware [of their activities]. Does this mean consent? If this is so then let the issue come into the open and let us all join this movement." 'Uday demanded radical measures to stop

⁷⁷ *Babil*, July 19, 1994.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

them. *Babil*'s editors added "an observation": "we have information on the centers and places where the Wahhabis are staying ... [W]e can supply the necessary information."⁷⁹ Indeed, before the 2003 demise of the regime, in top-secret documents the party's internal security bodies too reported the activities of Salafis in Iraq.⁸⁰

Did Saddam Become a Born Again Muslim?

In his private diary in 2000 Saddam's half-brother Barzan wrote that his brother, the president, went through some kind of psychological metamorphosis. "Since a few years," Barzan wrote, "the way the president thinks, unfortunately, is similar to the way of thinking of a monk who is sitting in a sanctuary and worshiping [God] (*tafkir rahib jalis fi mihrab wa yata'abbad*) ... I told the president ... of the danger of an alliance with the religious trend domestically and externally." Domestically, because Saddam aligned himself with Sunni Islamists that "will arouse Shi'i fears." Internationally, Barzan believed this would alienate the secular Arab regimes and "even Saudi Arabia." Eventually the Sunni fundamentalists would topple the regime, Barzan warned. Saddam remained silent.⁸¹ More internal evidence comes from Culture Minister, Latif Nusayyif Jasim, who disclosed in a 1995 private discussion that Saddam was becoming very religious. Once he asked why God had been punishing him so severely [since 1990]. He told Jasim, though, that no matter what punishments God would unleash against him he would never waver in his love for God.⁸² Saddam must have liked this discussion when he listened to the recording, but the fact that it was never made public may mean that it represented Jasim's genuine impression. Saddam as a latter-day Job does not sound very credible, but his public speeches as well as his words in closed-door meetings and his top-secret military communiqués since 1999-2000 imply a similar change. In the face of the lethal danger from the US he seemed

⁷⁹ *Babil*, June 12, 1994, pp. 12, in *FBIS-NES-DR JN1606122494*, June 16, 1994.

⁸⁰ See, for example, report from January 28, 2000 by the Ba'th Bureau of the North, about Islamist extremists in Kurdistan where the Ba'th regime had no control but had good information, CRRC, SH-BATH-D-000-066. Also, Hoover Institute Archive, Stanford, an un-catalogued report from July 22, 1995, directed to a secretary of a "Branch" (*amin sir qiyadat far'*) regarding "men of religion with religious-Salafi, Wahhabi, MB inclinations" (*ittijahat diniyyah salafiyyah, wahhabiyyah, ikhwan muslimun*).

⁸¹ Barzan's diary, last entrance Oct. 21, 2000, CRRC, SH-MISC-D-000-950, pp. 4 (p. 65 in the original diary).

⁸² CRRC, SH-PDWN-D-000-642, pp. 25.

to have felt that he did all that he could, and now it was God's responsibility to deliver him and Iraq.⁸³

Even though he aligned himself with them, Saddam's newly-found Islamism was not identical to that of the MB, the Wahhabis, or other Sunni Salafis like al-Qa'ida or the Taliban. He allowed the sale of spirits, he did not impose the *hijab*, he encouraged women to study and work outside the home, he despised Mullah Omar for the destruction of the Buddah statue and he was extraordinarily proud of the civilizations of ancient Iraq/Mesopotamia to his last day. Not being a *mullah* himself, he naturally objected ferociously to the Iranian concept of the rule of the religious jurist, but he also strongly objected to the Saudi way of running the state. In other words, his rule was "*shari'a*-lite." But he did introduce what he himself called an "upheaval in the lives of the Iraqis." It would seem that he felt this entitled him to be rewarded by God in this world, rather than in the next.

The most telling case in this respect was a 2002 letter he wrote to God. The letter was never made public, until now no Iraqi has ever heard of it. It was to be cast in pure gold letters that were to be affixed to a tablet of granite. The tablet was to be encased in a massive steel and lead box with an unbreakable glass front. It was to be placed inside the walls of Saddam's magnificent *umm al-ma'arik* mosque. This letter to God was designed to endure any disasters and time itself. One more item was to be placed in the big box: a small stainless steel box with a single pane of glass. In that box would rest a few hairs from Saddam's mustache. In his letter Saddam explained to God that "throughout their ... history the Arabs ... regarded their men's mustaches [as] a criterion of their commitment and [a] sign of their readiness to bear their gender's responsibility." In old Iraq indeed a hair from a man's mustache sometimes served as a guarantee, much like a handshake would in the West. He beseeched God "to protect the hairs of these mustaches together with protecting Iraq." The letter was signed by Saddam on May 22, 2002. Saddam's handwriting is disorderly and agitated, very atypical of his usual handwriting. It

⁸³ For a detailed analysis see A. Baram, *Mosque and State in Iraq 1968-2003: From Militant Secularism to Islamism*.

would seem that he was stressed and anxious when he wrote it. “Today I put these hairs from my mustache as trust (*wadi'ah*) with you,” he wrote to God, “...and by doing this I want that you will remember my history together with all the meanings that I placed with you,”⁸⁴ by which Saddam meant his Islamization measures including the building of mosques. In exchange he wanted deliverance. It is not certain that the letter was meant to remain a secret: the glass windows could be intended to allow the mosque-goers to see the contents, or this may have been planned for God’s benefit alone. Whatever the case, the project was never made public.

There is some reason therefore to believe that, in his own way, toward the end Saddam became a believer. The combined pressures of eight years of war against Iran, a crushing defeat in the first Gulf War, the total surprise of the Shi’i and Kurdish revolts, the years of embargo that seemed unending and, the unmistakable threat of an American assault, may have pushed him to return to the safety of his childhood Islam. His initial Faith Campaign was most likely a cynical step, designed to win popular support, but he rejected all attempts to change it even though it alienated at least some of the party. His alliance with the Islamists scared his closest supporters. While it is true that he and his security men took some precautions by infiltrating the Islamic extremist groups,⁸⁵ and from time to time they arrested and even executed some of them, Saddam nevertheless pursued this partnership. It would seem that Saddam believed that this partnership, as well as the wider Faith Campaign and even a very personal sacrifice like his contribution of many liters of his blood toward the writing of a Qur’an would win him grace in the eyes of God.

In the end, Saddam’s Faith Campaign helped transform Iraq by giving it an extra push in the direction of an authentic Islamization process that had already been set in motion. As frequenting the mosque was less risky than before, both in the Sunni and the Shi’i parts of Iraq, the mosque eventually became more influential than either the party headquarters or the tribal *mudif*. To give expression to their Shi’i identity, even secular Shi’is who could not forget the bloody

⁸⁴ CRRC, SH-PDWN-D-000-499, pp. 43-44 in the original, pp. 22-24 in the translation.

⁸⁵ Hoover Institute Archive, , un-catalogued report from July 22, 1995, Also Hoover Institute Archive, 01-3199-0002-0013 a similar report on ‘ulama with “patriotic” inclinations; and CRRC, SH-BATH-D-000-066 on Islamic extremists, report from Jan. 28, 2000, from the party Organization of Ninneweh, Duhuk & Irbil to the Regional Leadership.

suppression of the Shi'i revolt of 1991 visited the mosque more than they had before, and there they met with very devout co-religionists and with the '*ulama*. Indeed, the stature of the '*ulama* was enhanced beyond anything known in modern Iraqi history and they became their communities' leaders. As for the Sunni Salafis, the relative tolerance strengthened them. When the US invaded Iraq they found a more religious and more sectarian society than had ever been the case since the 1950s.

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