

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE DETERIORATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND
OPPOSITION POLITICS IN THE POLICE STATE OF
SADDAM HUSAYN

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This thesis will survey Iraqi political and social history from the earliest years of the monarchy to the Iran-Iraq War, but focus mainly on the years between the second Ba‘th takeover in 1968 and 1980, when Saddam Husayn was rooted firmly in power and the leadership of opposition parties was broken, disorganized, imprisoned, and in exile. The focus of my thesis will be the methods and resources used by the Ba‘th party and Saddam Hussein to take control and maintain control of the Iraqi state. These include cultural production, propaganda, and, most insidiously, the secret police. I also plan to write about opposition parties – religious and secular – and their mostly frustrated attempts to push back against the tide of Ba‘thism after 1968.

THE DETERIORATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND OPPOSITION POLITICS IN THE
POLICE STATE OF SADDAM HUSAYN

By

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The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

--Antonio Gramsci, from *The Prison Notebooks*

No stable state can arise or endure without a basic social philosophy, accepted by the mass of its citizens, more or less consciously pursued in public life and private associations, and guaranteed by its laws, whether it be the *Republica Christiana*, or the ideology of the Islamic community, or *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, or 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.' Nationalism by itself is not such a philosophy.

--Hamilton A. R. Gibb

Preface

I was a senior in high school on September 11, 2001; I remember clearly my best friend Matt Upham intercepting me as I walked from one class to another and telling me, without much urgency, that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center in Manhattan. I assumed at the time that a small passenger plane had experienced mechanical problems and had crashed accidentally into the towers, but was confronted with the reality of the situation when I arrived at a classroom with a television set.

Americans and indeed much of the international community reacted passionately to the events that morning. Yet the horror, the violence, the hatred, and the extraordinary bravery of the hours and minutes before, during, and after the initial attacks was largely lost to me; I was distracted with my own graduation, applications to colleges and universities, and my personal life.

The point is this: the events of September 11, 2001, inside and outside the United States, did to compel me to study the Middle East. I declared myself a history major (concentrating on the Middle East) at Trinity College only in the spring of 2004, and only after I had abandoned political science, and public policy and law. I never fully understood those who began their studies of the Middle East immediately after September 2001; to me, it was a lot like reading the instruction manual for a new appliance only after it had broken.

Therefore my writing on the Middle East is informed by my love for the Middle East, and not some misplaced fear of it or anger towards it. I think all historians inevitably develop an adoration, sometimes even a jealousy, for their subject material, and are quick to correct or dispel misinformation about it. That is not to say historians are

apologists or propagandists – only the worst are, and those are usually, and quickly, identified and treated as such.

The vast majority of historians are diligent, honest, and eager to earn the respect of their audience and their fellow historians. I count myself among them. This thesis, the culmination of years of research, writing, and – perhaps more importantly – learning how to research, how to write, is my contribution to the collected works of historians, past, present, and future, and to the body of scholarship on the Middle East. It is neither groundbreaking nor especially controversial, but it is what I believe, based on the sources and my own detective skills, happened. More importantly, it is why, how, and when it happened. Whether it is the truth is unknown; no history, however influential, however celebrated, can ever claim mastery of the truth. In the end, this thesis is as much about me as it is about modern Iraq.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank all those people in my life who have had a profound effect on my career as a student historian: my parents, a Protestant minister and an English teacher, who taught me the power and weight of words; my Trinity College professors, among them Jack Chatfield, Samuel Kassow, Jeffrey Bayliss, Clinton Bailey, Raymond Baker, and Isa Blumi, who taught me what it means to be a student; and my University of Maryland professors, Madeline Zilfi, Peter Wien, Antoine Borrut, who taught me what it means to be a historian. Special thanks go to my fellow graduate students, chiefly Alda Benjamen, Lyndon Bingaman, and Harrison Guthorn, for their emotional support over two years of graduate school and for their notes and suggestions – which were taken with the least amount of hostility humanly possible.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
A Note on Historiography	8
A Note on the Kurds	10
Chapter One: The Invention of Ba‘thist Iraq	12
The 1958 Revolution	16
The Ba‘th Party Before the 1968 Coup	18
The Origins of Ba‘thism	19
The Shadow State of Saddam Husayn	21
Institutions of Violence	27
Iraq’s Armed Forces	36
Conclusion	40
Chapter Two: Shi‘i Political Resistance	42
Clerical Political Activism between Iran and Iraq	43
Political Conflict and Cooperation between Iraqi Sunnis and Shi‘is	47
Reactions to Marxism, Secularism, and the Decline of the Hawza	51
Al-Sadr and his Philosophy	60
Shi‘i Political Organization and Opposition in Iraq	65
Conclusion	76
Chapter Three: Iraqi Communist Opposition	77
The Martyr’s Party	78
Membership and Recruitment	83
Communism Under the Ruler Regimes, 1958-1968	84
The ICP and the Ba‘th	87
Conclusion	94
Conclusion	96
Bibliography	98

Introduction

Something that is most attractive about Middle Eastern countries is that they defy comparative studies. Although so many modern Middle Eastern nation-states were once counted among territories of the Ottoman Empire and, before that, the early Islamic Empire, modern incarnations of Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia are entirely unique. It is true that common ideas of Arab nationalism, Islamic revivalism, anti-colonialism, and authoritarianism have left their marks on many of these nations, but each has experienced them (and often rebuked them) on its own terms. That is not to say that any Middle Eastern nation is monolithic, or could possibly summon anything close to a consensus *vis-à-vis* its self-perception or the perception of others. When scholars and pundits often speak of Middle Eastern countries they refer merely to those in command of government institutions; those largely nameless and faceless people who make up the vast majority of citizens are not considered. For much of this paper the actions, and reactions, of Iraqi government officials are essential, but the movements, rhetoric, and symbolism of opposition parties are equally important, as are the attitudes, allegiances, and aspirations of everyday Iraqis. Yet even the term Iraqi is a difficult one in the context of the modern Middle East. When did citizens of modern Iraq accept their designation as Iraqis? Such a conversation lies outside the scope of this paper; it is more concerned with political identities (not national ones) and the relationship of the state to its people. Many of these identities stretched beyond national boundaries: Iraqi communists had a connection to Soviet Russia, however cosmetic; clerics in the southern shrine cities of Iraq had very real connections to their counterparts and patrons in Iran; and Iraqi Kurds, many nomadic by tradition, often sought political asylum and refuge in neighboring

countries. Thus, while this paper makes no claims to transnational history – its epicenter is, in the end, Baghdad – it is informed by its theories. After all, as a region that has only recently, within a century, become home to European-style nation states, the Middle East represents a perfect candidate for transnational history. The borders of states like Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq were drawn up by League of Nations mandate rather haphazardly and with little respect for the religious, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity of the region. How Iraqis – politically powerful or otherwise – reconciled themselves with the new political, social, religious, and cultural situations of modern Iraq is the focus of this paper. It follows the birth, and sometimes the death, of opposition movements to the status quo in Iraq and the growth of civil society.

Despite many (sometimes violent) setbacks, violations of personal liberty, and the inescapable fact that for much of the twentieth century the institutions of power in Iraq were in the hands of a select few corrupt politicians or military commanders, there is convincing evidence that growing in Iraq, especially after the end of World War II, was a nascent civil society, a “politics of the street,”¹ and a group of political opposition parties, some more influential than others, that represented almost every major political, ethnic, and religious denomination in Iraq. And if the so-called revolution of 1958 was the high point of civil participation in Iraqi politics, and of non-governmental sources of political authority, then the advent of Ba‘thism, briefly in 1963 and permanently in 1968, was its low point. Ba‘thism, especially in the hands of Saddam Husayn, overtook the Iraqi state and Iraqi society to such an extreme degree that political party, national state, and civil society became almost indistinguishable, turning traditional sources of anti-government

¹ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 72.

action, the army, opposition parties, religious institutions, either into extensions of Ba‘thist power or into enemies of the Ba‘th party, which meant, in the new dictionary of Saddam Husayn, enemies of the state and enemies of the people. In this new political world, where state and society were subjugated to political party, opposition groups could barely function: the body that had acted as spearhead for revolutionary change (the army) had been overrun by Ba‘thist officers, the civil bureaucracy had been staffed by a cadre of party loyalists, and civil society, or what remained of it, was now represented by Iraqis scared away from political action by the threat of torture and death.

The purpose of this paper is to walk a narrow line between two historiographical conceptualizations of modern Iraq, a deterministic model that imagines Saddam Husayn as historically inevitable and an individualist model that blames everything wrong with modern Iraq on Husayn. In many ways, the two pictures of Husayn presented by modern scholarship represent a larger debate between structure and agency, in other words, were opposition parties and civil society organizations long-standing victims of institutional weaknesses in modern Iraq, or did Husayn target, and eliminate, these group with never-before-seen viciousness and tenacity. My argument, and my contribution to scholarship on modern Iraq, is that Husayn emerged from a broken political system built on patrimonialism, not pluralism, and thus was one in a long line of political despots, but that the ideology and violence of his particular political system was new and especially dangerous to political, and Party, opposition.

Chapter One follows the advent of Ba‘thism in modern Iraq, its initial relationship with the ruling authorities, and, finally, the ways in which the Iraqi state was transformed, under Saddam Husayn, into a police state. Yet the transformation from republican Iraq,

with all its institutional weaknesses and democratic imbalances, to the Ba‘thist interpretation of republican Iraq is not only a story of the emergence of a police state based on the threat and use of violence. What exactly Ba‘thism and politics meant to those in power and those outside of power is equally important. Therefore, Chapter One is not simply a history of the Ba‘th regime, but also, in the words of Kanan Makiya, an “enquiry into its meaning.”²

Chapter Two recapitulates and analyzes clerical and popular religious opposition to the state in modern Iraq, but focuses mainly on the Shi‘i party *al-Da‘wa*, an organization and movement that became, after the fall of communism and the rise of secular, pan-Arab Ba‘thism, the most potent organization capable of defending Islamic values and Shi‘i civil rights in Iraq.

Chapter Three follows the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), which was not merely an extension of Soviet communism, but a popular party of Iraqi nationalism. Like *al-Da‘wa*, the ICP was one of the more influential, and more-often targeted, counter-hegemonic organizations in post-war Iraq. Its relationship with Ba‘thism was particularly paradoxical and, eventually, particularly violent.

A few definitions are in order. Much of this paper is dedicated to political opposition under Ba‘thism, but academic definitions of political opposition are hardly uniform. Moreover, published interpretations of political opposition are frequently limited in scope to a particular region (e.g., Eastern Europe, Western Europe) and a particular type of political system. As a result, information relevant to particular countries is rarely swept together into a comprehensive framework that speaks definitively about

² Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xxxv.

the nature of political opposition.³ For the purposes of this paper, political opposition represents the politically active, politically disenfranchised organizations that entered into a contest, sometimes peaceful, sometimes violent, with the ruling central government. The majority of this political opposition took place outside politically-sanctioned arenas, since most were monopolized by the Iraqi ruling elite, whether Hashemite, republican, or Ba‘thist. In this way, my definition of political opposition is different from that of Ghita Ionescu, who separates “opposition” – non-institutionalized forms of disagreement – from “political opposition” – institutionalized forms of disagreement, i.e., disagreement recognized and legitimized by a constitution.⁴ For Ionescu political opposition is the most advanced and institutionalized form of political conflict; the term should be used only in reference to situations where an opposition is not merely *allowed to function*, but is actually entrusted *with a function*. In other words, political opposition is an indicator for a parliamentary, democratic, or otherwise open and free political society. Its absence indicates a dictatorial or monolithic power structure.⁵ Obviously, this conceptualization is at odds with my own, which designates organized, programmatic political resistance as “political opposition,” regardless of the political society.

The idea of civil society is also an important component of this paper, indeed an important component of all studies of the contemporary Middle East. As far as this paper is concerned, civil society is an umbrella term that captures all of the non-governmental, non-familial organizations and loyalties in a given society that provide an extra-

³ Jean Blondel, “Political Opposition in the Contemporary World” in *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 32, Issue 4 (1997): 462.

⁴ Frederick M. Barnard, “Between Opposition and Political Opposition: The Search for Competitive Politics in Czechoslovakia” in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1972): 533.

⁵ Ghita Ionescu and Isabel de Madariaga, *Opposition: Past and Present of a Political Institution* (Harmondsworth: Oenguin Books, 1968), 16

governmental source of political influence and an outlet for the free expression of political ideas. This applies, in the Middle East, to religious groups, women's organizations, business groups, organized labor, etc. An example of Middle Eastern civil society is the Kuwaiti *diwaniyya*, meeting places that have proved politically influential. It is commonly understood among politically-active Kuwaitis that no politician could hope to win office unless he or she visited most, if not all, of the *diwaniyya* of his or her district.⁶ For most of this paper, civil society organizations overlap with opposition parties, but Ba'athism did more than simply crush opposition movements; it absorbed civil society to such an extreme degree that extra-governmental politics and associational life were all but impossible.

Another, sometimes unwritten, thread that ties together this paper is nationalism, particularly two variants of nationalism that determined many political and social events and transformations in twentieth-century Iraq: Iraqi nationalism and Arab nationalism. In the simplest terms, Iraqi nationalism represented a distinct Iraqi national identity, the primacy of its cultural history and internal political, social, and agricultural realities, and downplayed the importance of its Arab and Islamic identity and heritage. Arab nationalism, on the contrary, prized Iraq's legacy of Arabism – particularly Arab culture, Arab history, and Arabic language – and the idea of a unified Arab state. Although both ideologies created much of the political friction in the years after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, their proponents shared many rhetorical devices, narratives, and goals, for example, and particularly during the British Mandate, anti-colonialism. The British presence in Iraq was, on one hand, relevant for Iraqi nationalists, in part because it was a

⁶ Augustus Richard Norton, "The Future of Civil Society in the Middle East" in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (1993): 210.

problem unique to Iraq and in part because many of the pro-British Iraqi politicians were largely pan-Arab; it was, at the very least, advocated by the monarchy.⁷ On the other hand, for many who adopted a pan-Arab agenda, Arab nationalism represented an anti-colonial option whereby all Arab nation-states could rise up together and throw off the yolk of European colonialism.

All of the ideologies discussed throughout this paper are connected in some way to ideas of Iraqi or Arab nationalism. Politically, the left-leaning Iraqi organizations, and especially the Iraqi Communist Party, pushed enthusiastically for an Iraqi agenda. Those in government who supported Arab unity were characterized often by the ICP as disingenuous: they pretended to support Arab nationalism to win popular support but in reality held their own self-interest above the formation of an Arab nation; they were not visionaries, they were a group of elite politicians subordinated to colonial powers. Ideas of Iraqi nationalism were especially popular among politically active Shi'is who spent much of the twentieth century in the role of a political minority; they distrusted pan-Arabism in large part because for many of them it represented Sunni domination.

Pan-Arabism, although at times and in its most radical forms showed hostility toward European interventionism, was mostly borrowed from ideas of Arabism that predated World War I and tied up in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. The idea of Arab nationalism proved incredibly mercurial, however: in the 1930s, Iraqi intellectuals and politicians continued to prize Arabic language and Arab history as focal components of Arabism but increasingly imagined Arab nationalism through an imperial lens, probably borrowed from European narratives, and looked to resurrect a glorious

⁷ Orit Baskhin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 127.

Arab-Islamic imperial body.⁸ Ideas of resurrection and revival were important foundations for many groups that espoused pan-Arabism, especially the Ba‘th Party. Although the Party, by the time Saddam Husayn became president, could have been, and was, blamed for sabotaging pan-Arab unity (rivalry with Egypt’s Nasser, lack of military support for the Palestinian independence movement, etc.), it was in its origins a socialist, nationalist, anti-colonial movement that called for a common Arab struggle for independence. Revival emerged among Ba‘th theorists as a necessary step toward the “revolutionary future.”⁹

A Note on Historiography

Several significant problems confront scholars of modern Iraq, especially scholars who study Iraq after the 1958 revolution. Since that critical historical juncture, it has been exceptionally difficult for scholars, foreigners and Iraqis alike, to carry out research in Iraq. As a result the best-known field studies of modern Iraqi society are based on work carried out before 1958.¹⁰ Many of the works cited in this paper were written by authors who could not, or did not, go to Iraq, and thus used as their sources European and American archives, newspapers, official Iraqi statistics, etc. Certain types of histories can be molded from such sources, but not comprehensive histories and certainly not detailed social histories. Most disturbing are a small number of sources that claim objectivity (admittedly an impossibility for any historian) but merely reprint the “official” history of Iraq according to the Ba‘th Party, or the Hashemite monarchs, or the Free Officers. Majid

⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰ Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, “The Historiography of Modern Iraq,” in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 5 (1991): 1408.

Khadduri is, unfortunately, one of the authors whose reliance on official histories and interviews with high-level Ba‘thists has negatively affected his later academic work. Consider this quotation from *Socialist Iraq*: “More important perhaps are [Husayn’s] potentials in prudence, flexibility and resourcefulness which quickly come into operation whenever he has to make an important decision at a time of crisis. These qualities, combined with integrity and high moral courage, are his Party’s best promise for the country’s future leadership.”¹¹

Yet many of the books cited in this paper are some of the best written about Iraqi history, most notably Hanna Batatu’s magnum opus *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, without which no serious study of modern Iraq can be written. One reviewer called it “a masterpiece of historical literature that singlehandedly catapults Iraq from the least known of the major Arab countries to the Arab society of which we now have the most thorough political portrait.”¹² The end result of twenty years of research, *The Old Social Classes* has become hugely influential and led, shortly after its release, to a scholarly reexamination of the meaning of the 1958 revolution.¹³ Equally important for this paper is *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*, written by Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, and *Republic of Fear*, a highly original and savage denunciation of Ba‘thism in Iraq. *Republic of Fear*, which figures prominently in the chapter on the secret police in Ba‘thist Iraq, is far from perfect; it reprints stories and rumors¹⁴ that more disciplined historians might discard as speculative. Yet its importance, especially *vis-à-vis* apologetic (intentional or otherwise) accounts of

¹¹ Majid Khadduri, *Socialist Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics Since 1968* (Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1978), 76.

¹² Joe Stork, *MERIP Reports*, No. 97 (1981): 23.

¹³ Farouk-Sluglett, “The Historiography of Modern Iraq,” 1410.

¹⁴ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, xxxvi.

Ba‘thism, should not be understated. Still, in many ways, *Republic of Fear*, written by Kanan Makiya, sits at the opposite end of works that represent Iraqi Ba‘thism and Saddam Husayn as guarantors of Iraq’s republican future, and in that respect is similarly polemical. Makiya, a secular Shi‘i born to an English mother and educated in the United States, became after 1989 one of the foremost, perhaps the foremost chronicler of the horrors of Iraqi Ba‘thism under Husayn, and one of the most vocal proponents for his overthrow.¹⁵ In the build-up to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Makiya became a voice of urgency and persuasiveness about American military intervention in Iraq; two months before the war started, Makiya visited then-President Bush in the Oval Office and said that American soldiers would be greeted by Iraqis with “sweets and flowers.”¹⁶ Therefore, *Republic of Fear* must be, and is in this paper, treated carefully and with the recognition that Makiya wrote it with a clear political purpose.

Primary sources included in this paper – mostly speeches, internal memoranda, and political treatises – explain the evolution of Ba‘thist ideology and political power, the internal workings of the communist party that for so many years existed underground, and the political realities of the Shi‘i community in Iraq.

A Note on the Kurds

The Kurdish population of Iraq, which, according to authoritative estimates, equals roughly twenty-three percent of its overall population,¹⁷ will be mentioned only briefly in the following pages; this is neither a deliberate act of omission nor an implicit

¹⁵ Dexter Filkins, “Regrets Only?” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 2007, accessed May 1, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/magazine/07MAKIYA-t.html>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Kerim Yildiz and Georgina Fryer, *The Kurds: Culture and Language Rights* (Great Britain: Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2004), 98.

statement of the Kurds' unimportance in the political and social history of modern Iraq, but rather because the "Kurdish question" as represented in Middle Eastern scholarship and in Iraqi politics was and often is considered *sui generis*. In other words, although the integration or separation of the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq has been one of the more important pillars of Iraqi domestic policy throughout the twentieth century, Kurdish political opposition was viewed as a political force that could not always easily be included in the larger project of nation-building in Iraq. Moreover, Kurdish opposition to the central government was often separatist in nature, and thus unlike the political aims of Iraqi communists and the leadership and membership of Iraq's many religious parties. For these reasons, Kurdish political opposition, usually informed by the idea of an autonomous Kurdistan, is most conveniently discussed as a separate issue.

Chapter One: The Invention of Ba‘thist Iraq

Iraq on the eve of the second and long-lasting Ba‘thist takeover of government was, firstly, a comparatively young and inexperienced nation-state, one that was still in the process of reconciling itself with modernity, with the foreign policy demands of the Middle East and beyond, and with the religious, ethnic, linguistic, and ideological heterogeneity of its population; secondly, it was in an embryonic stage of popular political participation, of powerful opposition groups, and of civic and social organizations removed from the power structure of the state. Yet Ba‘thism, or, more appropriately, the violent and totalitarian version of Ba‘thism practiced by Saddam Husayn, dealt a crippling and irreversible blow to civil society and pluralism in Iraq. That is not to say that Iraq of the 1950s and 1960s was a political utopia like those dreamt of by Immanuel Kant or Thomas Paine; it certainly did not compare favorably to democratic systems in Europe, Asia, or in the Middle East. Yet the evidence of nascent civil society and pluralism exists: consider the Iraqi Communist Party, which was not simply a product of Cold War tensions in the Middle East, but rather a popular party of Iraqi nationalism; or the many religious political organizations that argued, explicitly or otherwise, for sources of power outside the framework of government. The point of this chapter is to explain why and how the Iraqi Ba‘th Party changed forever the political landscape of Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s, and why, in the end, those sources of political authority outside the framework of government – which had previously been capable of significant opposition in monarchical and republican Iraq – proved powerless to intervene.

Here, it is important to include a brief outline on how political power was imagined, institutionalized, and achieved in Iraq before 1958. In many ways Ba‘thist ideology suffused a pre-existing Iraqi power structure that had been slowly building since the beginning of the British mandate. Several important developments are of primary interest: the politicization of the officer corps in the Iraqi army (which is elaborated upon in a later section), the emergence of Baghdad as the ultimate center of political gravity, and the political mobilization of a growing middle and working class who, despite being largely excluded from the central government, formed a source of political and intellectual power that ran parallel to the state machinery.

In the inter-war period, Iraqi society experienced several positive advances: extensive rural-to-urban migration (and subsequent challenges to rural culture); expansion of print media; new forms of cultural production; and the growth of associational life, including professional organizations, student groups, political clubs, and labor syndicates.¹⁸ These developments indicated an embryonic civil society, a phenomenon Karl Deutsch called “social mobilization,” something that happens to large groups of people in areas that undergo modernization. Social mobilization is a blanket term that describes the changes brought on by widespread acceptance of non-traditional practices in culture, technology, and economic life: changes of residence, occupation, social setting, associates, roles, experiences, and expectations. In other words, social mobilization is the need, rooted in modernity, for new images of personal identity and new patterns of group loyalty.¹⁹

¹⁸ Davis, *Memories of State*, 72.

¹⁹ Karl W. Deutsch, “Social Mobilization and Political Development” in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (1961): 493.

Through the creation and evolution of new organizations (many with political tendencies) and the expansion of education and the press, the newly-urbanized middle class of Iraq sought to develop new social connections, discover new opportunities for cultural and political expression, and create new loyalties that transcended the family, clan, or nation. Yet the interwar period was not simply represented by the dynamic spread of new associations and civil society organizations; it was represented by an often closed political system in which the vast majority of Iraqis were unable to participate in politics. In other words, even while political parties and civic organizations expanded, political options for everyday middle and lower class Iraqis shrunk. The combination of increased political mobilization with a political system based on patronage, nepotism, and elitism created a “politics of the street”²⁰ whereby politically-conscious Iraqis excluded from the central government and its institutions could either divorce themselves from politics altogether or criticize the state through media, public protest, strikes, etc. It is important to note that while so many of these politically-aware parties, organizations, clubs, and newspapers were unsuccessful in petitioning the government and unable to “fulfill their potential for creating a more tolerant and open political system,”²¹ they were allowed to exist, to publish, to strike, and to recruit new members. Through a variety of means, these organizations were barred from political office and unable to effect legislation, but they were, in the end, allowed to survive, often above ground. Such governmental toleration cannot be attached to Ba‘thism under Saddam Husayn.

Throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, new political parties, many with programmatic platforms, emerged in Iraq. Three different socialist groups joined together

²⁰ Davis, *Memories of State*, 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*

in 1934 to form the Iraqi Communist Party; the Iraqi branch of Hizb al-Ba‘th (The Ba‘th Party) was created in 1952; the National Democratic Party, which advocated social democracy and political reform by parliamentary means,²² was founded in 1946; the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, which favored pan-Arabism, was also licensed in 1946.

The post-war period in Iraq was one of increasing coerciveness of the regime and increasing popularity (although decreasing mobility) for opposition parties. Whereas in the first twenty years of the monarchy (1921-1941), Baghdad was not once placed under martial law, between 1941 and 1958 martial law was declared four times, and applied to the capital city for a total of 2,843 days – almost eight out of seventeen years.²³ When the three main political parties – National Democrats, Istiqlal, and the Communists – joined together in a National Front in May 1954 and won 11 out of 135 seats, Nuri al-Sa‘id, the major power broker in post-war Iraq, banned all opposition parties and newspapers and installed a totally servile parliament. A second national front was formed in early 1957, which included the three main parties plus the Ba‘th Party, which had approximately 300 members in Iraq in 1955.²⁴ Yet, because the political institutions of Iraq were off limits to oppositionist politicians and because the regime had a monopoly on the instruments of coercion, the monarchy was only toppled by military force in 1958.

²² Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 114.

²³ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba‘thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 345-346.

²⁴ Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2001), 43-45.

The 1958 Revolution

One of the seminal events in the history of modern Iraq was the 1958 revolution, which permanently dissolved the Hashemite monarchy and, by extension, the last vestiges of British colonial rule which had been the status quo in Iraq since the end of World War I. The Iraqi state had perhaps been walking a path which inevitably led to a dramatic shift in political paradigms for, despite intellectual growth and brief periods of relatively democratic participation in government in the years after 1941, the central authority of Iraq reinforced the same systems of patronage, cooption, and the sometimes ruthless use of force that characterized the state during the 1920s and 30s.

When, in mid-July 1958, the monarchy was toppled, it was ultimately military men who ended the careers and lives of King Faisal and Nuri al-Sa'id, but it was the activities of opposition organizations like the National Democratic Party, the Independence Party, and the Iraqi Communist Party which gradually eroded the legitimacy of the monarchy and Sa'id to a point where the military could take control. The constituents of these groups held high expectations for reforms after the establishment of a republic, but many of those expectations would be frustrated between 1958 and 1963, the period during which Iraq was dominated by Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Qasim.

The narrative of the revolution has been hijacked by countless groups in the years after the fact, most famously by the Ba'ath, who blamed the failure of the revolution on Qasim's cult of personality and his sabotage of pan-Arab unity, which according to their rhetoric was the central reason for the revolution. The question ultimately arises: was the 1958 revolution a revolution at all or did it more closely resemble the military coups

which dominated the political landscape in Iraq in the mid to late 30s? The question is thorny and the answer is somewhat contradictory. The 1958 Revolution was certainly a political revolution, one which swept aside a long-standing monarchical system and replaced it with a republic; and it was a social revolution, or at least a socially-inspired revolution, typified by increased civil and political activity preceding and succeeding the revolution. What it was not, however, was an institutional revolution. Qasim, who became the face of the Republic in the years after the Revolution, neither institutionalized his leadership (like Egypt's Nasser) nor did he institutionalize the ideas of the revolution. As a result the popular movement that had paved a path for military intervention became largely symbolic and Qasim, despite any personal virtues, fell back into a system of patronage and autocracy, which the revolution had failed to sweep away.

Qasim's successors, 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif and 'Abd al-Rahman 'Arif, who would rule Iraq from 1963-1968, similarly fell into a system of patronage, and kinship and tribal affiliations. Unlike Qasim, however, 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif abandoned all semblance of partnership with civil organizations and instead looked to consolidate his power in the armed forces and among the economically and religiously conservative sections of society. In the first few months following his coup, 'Arif dismantled the Ba'th Party, which had briefly taken control of Iraq in early 1963, and removed senior military Ba'thists from positions of command.²⁵ When Ba'thists once again took power in 1968, therefore, there was a large political vacuum in Iraq. 'Arif's reliance on loyal military units and wealthy patrons and the disintegration of several opposition parties²⁶ allowed

²⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 175-181.

²⁶ See Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 82. The NDP became divided over whether or not to support Qasim and broke up into a number of factions in 1961, and the Istiqlal Party lost its political clout and some of its members joined the Ba'th Party.

the Ba‘th to reassemble, make important alliances with disgruntled and disillusioned army officers, and stage another coup.

The Ba‘th Party Before the 1968 Coup

Superficially, the Iraqi Ba‘th (or Arab Socialist Party) resembled one of its greatest political rivals in Iraq, the Communist Party. Featuring strict internal statutes, a highly-organized party command structure, and a system of party congresses used to amend its constitution (adopted in April 1947) or resolve itself with changing political dynamics across the Arab world,²⁷ the Ba‘th party conducted its internal and external political business much like Iraqi communists. Articles five and six of The Constitution of the Arab Resurrection Socialist Party read much like the goals of Iraqi communists. Article five explains: “...dominion belongs to the people, that they alone are the origin of all government and leadership, and that the value of the state derives from the will of the masses...” Article six describes the character of the Party: “The Arab Resurrection Socialist Party is revolutionary...building socialism cannot be achieved except by revolution and strife.”²⁸ Yet, despite these apparent similarities, the extent of ideology and of structural organization may be overestimated *vis-à-vis* the process of recruiting and retaining members to the Ba‘th Party. In fact, kinship and familial loyalty proved indispensable to the party affiliation especially before 1968, when Ba‘thists took power in Iraq. Equally important were common sectarian and geographic origins, which often

²⁷ John F. Devlin, *The Ba‘th Party: A History from Its Origins to 1966*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976. Pages 149, 333-341, 345.

²⁸ Sami A. Hanna and George H. Gardner, *Arab Socialism: A Documentary Survey* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1969), 307.

provided a more permanent sense of group loyalty than ideological or political beliefs;²⁹ many important figures in the government of Saddam Husayn, after all, came from his hometown of Tikrit. Yet the nepotism and parochialism of Husayn is only one example: Fu'ad al-Rikabi, the Shi'i founder of Iraqi Ba'athism in the 1950s, saw his organization comprised almost completely of Shi'i kinsmen and classmates; and 'Ali Salih al-Sa'di, secretary-general of the Ba'th Party (1961-63) recruited "petty criminals like himself" from Baghdad.³⁰

Therefore, to describe the Ba'th Party in Iraq as the organizational and ideological equal of Iraqi Communism is something of an exaggeration. Although there existed, on the eve of the Ba'athist takeover in 1968, some broad organizational, structural, and ideological underpinnings to Ba'athism in general and Iraqi Ba'athism in particular, the party (at least its most active members) more closely resembled an interconnected group of like-minded kinsmen and friends and not a party whose members were united in their devotion to a peculiar ideology or political system.

The Origins of Ba'athism

Although Ba'athism experienced many of its growing pains and ideological developments in Iraq, the movement was born in Syria. The Ba'th Party was founded in Damascus in 1944 by an unlikely trio, all educated at the Sorbonne in Paris: Michel 'Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox Christian; Salah al-Din Bitar, a Sunni Muslim; and Zaki al-Arsuzi, an Alawite. The movement was conceived while Syria was still under the French Mandate, and bore all the hallmarks of a national liberation movement. The Ba'th, whose

²⁹ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 108.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

intellectuals called for the end of colonial dominations and complete economic and political independence, were similar to other modern, anti-colonial movements in the era of decolonization.³¹ After the end of World War II, the Ba‘th Party expanded into a mass political organization; it rallied against the “political and ideological inadequacies” of the older generation of Syrian nationalists and other Arab politicians, regarded as responsible for the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine in 1948.³² By 1954 (in part because Arab nationalism enjoyed popularity in Syria) sixteen Ba‘thists were elected to the Syrian parliament. The Party also began to win over adherents in areas outside Syria; branches opened in Jordan and Iraq in the early 1950s.³³

The Ba‘th Party spread to Iraq beginning in 1949, but only in a very limited way. The nascent organization first materialized in Baghdad’s colleges; its initial members were mostly college and secondary school students, many of whom had become disillusioned with the Istiqlal Party.³⁴ In 1951, Fu’ad ar-Rikabi took over as chief Ba‘th organizer and remained in that position for the next eight years. Under ar-Rikabi’s leadership, the Party rose “in number and in quality,” expanding from 50 members in 1951 to over 100 in 1952 (when it was officially recognized as a branch of the original Party in Syria) to 289 members in 1955.³⁵ In 1958, Ba‘thists supported the overthrow of the monarchy and the revolution; al-Rikabi even participated in Qasim’s first cabinet. However, the alliance was short-lived: Ba‘thists, disenchanted with Qasim’s support for the ICP (bitter rivals of the Ba‘th) and his adherence to Iraqi, rather than pan-Arab,

³¹Orit Bashkin, “Looking Forward to the Past: Nahda, Revolution, and the Early Ba‘th in Iraq” in *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature* ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen, Gang Zhou, Sander L. Gilman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 61.

³²Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 87-88.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 742.

³⁵*Ibid.*

nationalism, led to a failed assassination attempt in 1959. Despite harsh retaliatory measures, the Party was able to reassemble and participate in the coup in 1963. For nine months the Ba‘th maintained a tenuous hold over Iraq until internal divisions led to another coup. Reorganized and empowered with the support of key army officers, Ba‘thists once again seized power in July 1968.³⁶

It is vital to note that although Ba‘thists, once in power, were responsible for violence against Iraqi citizens, patrimonialism, and, eventually, the creation of a police state, many early members of the Party were caught up in the web of fear, autocracy, and violence which characterized the Iraqi political arena before 1968. In June 1955, 22 members (including ar-Rikabi) of the Party were arrested after protesting against the Baghdad Pact; other members were expelled from colleges and schools. It is likely that a substantially larger number of members and supporters were detained by the police and released for lack of evidence.³⁷ Therefore, Ba‘thism did not invent political injustice, patronage politics, and dictatorship in Iraq – the political discrimination against Ba‘thists in the 1950s is evidence the Party suffered at the hands of the security police and general authoritarianism. Yet opposition politics endured and civil society existed on a significant level. Only under Saddam Husayn did Party, state, and people merge in a “single, great, formless mass.”³⁸

The Shadow State of Saddam Husayn

The regime of Saddam Husayn lasted longer than any Iraqi administration of the twentieth century – this strange statement is emblematic of the paradox that was Iraq

³⁶ Bashkin, “Nahda, Revolution,” 77-78.

³⁷ Devlin, *The Ba‘th Party*, 107.

³⁸ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 41.

under Husayn; it enjoyed unprecedented profits from its oil industry and witnessed the expansion of a professional bureaucracy, but was infamous for brutal political repression, systematic violence, and belligerence in the inter-state arena of the Middle East. On the surface, Husayn's Iraq appeared edificial, unified, and militarily formidable; indeed that was true of the veneer that obscured the real power of Iraq in the years between 1968 and 2003. True authority, however, lay in the hands of Saddam Husayn and the small group of men he considered either loyal or pliable and therefore worthy of inclusion in his circle of leadership. It was this shadow government, hidden beneath the imagery, rhetoric and historical narratives of Ba'athist Iraq, which ultimately weakened the Iraqi state, even as it strengthened Husayn and his allies. Never before in modern Iraqi history had a leader absorbed the identity of the state so thoroughly into his own singular personality, thus ensuring that whatever political cohesion existed under his regime would deteriorate upon his death or removal from power.

An indictment of the Iraq of Saddam Husayn is simultaneously an indictment of the governmental institutions and policies of the fifty years of Iraqi politics that preceded his ascension to power, since the policies of patronage and cooptation that defined Iraq from 1920 to 1968 were perpetuated with renewed intensity by Husayn. Manipulated by generations of Iraqi statesmen, from regents and kings to the grand practitioner of patronage in the 1940s and 50s Nuri al-Sa'id, the institutions of the Iraqi state had over the years drawn into the political world Iraqis in position to deliver something of importance to their benefactors. Husayn simply revived a long-standing tradition of twentieth-century Iraqi politicking. He did so, however, with a special emphasis on his monumental personality.

Iraq during the tenure of Saddam Husayn can be divided between two realms of government: operational and institutional. On the operational level, the rise of the Ba‘th and Saddam Husayn carried with it an expansion in scope of the state bureaucracy, bringing the state into the lives of more Iraqis than ever before. The state also reinvested the money earned from vast oil revenues in the domestic market and used a portion of the funds to create the infrastructure required to support its development projects. In fact, until the mid 1980s when the drawn-out war with Iran began to seriously affect the Iraqi economy, Iraq had enough money to support both a state welfare system and the capitalization of private and public enterprises. Thus, the state provided opportunities for economic advancement within the middle class and even among the rural and urban poor who had traditionally existed on the margins of society.³⁹

Existing parallel to this operational level and making it possible were the institutions of the Iraqi state, which had endured revolutions, coups, and abortive reforms. These “engines of power” had long allowed the politicians who inherited them to accumulate power and resources, create networks of loyal and useful clients, and maintain control over the Iraqi population. Husayn was no different. His state was centered on a restrictive circle of close associates who were connected to him through familial ties or through shows of loyalty. These men formed the inner circle of the Iraqi state while the mass of bureaucrats, businessmen, and officers represented the outer circle. In this way, Husayn’s Iraq was the Iraq of Faisal, Nuri al-Sa‘id, Qasim and ‘Arif: an institutionalized system of patronage obscured by a functional bureaucracy.⁴⁰

³⁹ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 229-230.

⁴⁰ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 216.

Although Saddam Husayn ruled Iraq through fear and by eliminating political opposition inside and outside its borders, it would be unfair to blame all the weaknesses of the Iraqi state during his ascension to power solely on his violent and paranoid personality. The years between 1959 and 1968 saw several important changes that would allow the Ba’th party to capture power more easily in 1968: the weakening of nationalist political parties and labor unions, the marginalization of corporate groups that might challenge the power of the central state, and increased sectarianism in political life. The totalitarianism and extreme violence of Ba’thism, therefore, did not emerge from a political and social vacuum. Husayn and his supporters did not invent what made Iraq politically fragile nor did they single-handedly obliterate civil society. In the words of Kanan Makiya, Husayn “was an imitator, not an innovator.”⁴¹ Yet the consistency and determination with which Husayn implemented his violent vision of Iraq made him politically unique and particularly dangerous to opposition and community politics.

From the very beginning of the Ba’thist state in 1968, it became clear that Saddam Husayn wished to distinguish himself from his fellow party members and fellow Tikritis. Throughout his rise to power and during his long duration in office, Husayn projected an image of the rare, indispensable, and necessary leader, one who was uniquely capable of leading his followers and his country to positions of power and privilege; no other potential leader could reproduce his unparalleled ability to lead Iraq into the future. Consequently, Husayn looked to create in himself a unifying force representative of all Iraq around which its citizens could rally. Political unity was expressed not in Baghdad, nor a legislative assembly, nor the office of the President; political unity was expressed in Saddam Husayn.

⁴¹ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 10.

Under Husayn's leadership, new myths of Iraqi identity and new narratives of Iraqi history were disseminated among the population. Chief among these was a succession myth, which traced Iraqi hegemony from the ancient kingdoms of Mesopotamia, through the Abbasid Caliphate up to Husayn himself, who was the most recent in a long line of unbroken political succession.⁴²

Once Husayn assumed the presidency, he created national institutions to protect this national myth and others and to sustain his own personality cult, which portrayed him as representative of all the people of Iraq. By the mid-1970s the Ba'ath Party had become a country-wide organization, efficiently organized and increasingly present in every sphere of life. The smallest unit was a party cell (*halqa*), organized at the neighborhood level; the next unit was the division (*firqa*), consisting of several cells and covering entire residential areas; then the section (*shu'ba*); and so on up to the national command.⁴³

This highly organized Ba'athist apparatus, which reached citizens in the smallest villages and neighborhoods, was one of many instruments used to propagate Husayn's singular authority. Others included the army, paramilitary organizations like the Popular Army and the National Assembly, and the first Iraqi parliament since the dissolution of the monarchy in 1958. The Assembly was more or less symbolic; its members had no legislative authority. It did have a purpose, however: to create an impression that the conduct of the government was being supervised, to provide a symbol of national unity, and to give Husayn another forum to present himself as the necessary leader of Iraq.⁴⁴

⁴² Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 217.

⁴³ Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 184.

⁴⁴ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 218.

The above-mentioned organizations were national only because they included Iraqi citizens from all regions of the country; in reality they were instruments of patronage and reward, whereby Iraqis who demonstrated loyalty to Husayn would be repaid with positions of power and financial resources. Those Iraqis bold enough to refuse the patron-client⁴⁵ system found it impossible to participate in politics in any meaningful way. Subsequently, nearly 500,000 Iraqi professionals and intellectuals left Iraq by the mid-1980s.⁴⁶

In this atmosphere it became increasingly dangerous to practice non-Ba‘thist politics or criticize the government. The security forces loyal to Husayn were quick to clamp down on subversive material and those who disparaged the regime’s policies. Consequently large numbers of Iraqis simply quit politics altogether and limited their social interaction to family members and close friends.⁴⁷

It is important to note that while admission into the political arena depended largely on Husayn’s acceptance, his regime did appoint to symbolically important governmental and civic positions citizens of the Iraqi state who were neither Sunni nor Arab. This acceptance of non-Sunni Arabs was not due to any type of political pluralism but rather to two ulterior motives: 1) Husayn’s desire to create a base of power throughout Iraq that would be dependent on him and therefore protective of his regime against adversity and 2) his wish to undermine the legitimacy of traditionally powerful

⁴⁵ The patron-client system was nothing new by the time Saddam Husayn became the ultimate political power in Iraq; certainly it extended backward into Iraq’s Ottoman imperial past. Yet beginning with the installation of Faisal as king, a distinctive pattern of politics emerged, especially in Baghdad, which combined political power with networks of clients and associates. The main commodity in this patronage system, which brought together power brokers in Baghdad and tribal notables from northern and southern Iraq, was land. In the new Iraqi state, land rights became the foundational currency for a system of patronage that survived the monarchy, the early republic under Qasim and ‘Arif, and was rejuvenated by Saddam Husayn.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 185.

sectarian and regional leaders, replacing them with pliable leaders who could deliver the loyalty of their group, clan, or constituency.⁴⁸

Institutions of Violence

All studies of Ba‘thism in Iraq invariably suffer from the secrecy that shrouded its governmental, military, and police operations, and thus a lack of reliable sources.

Discussions of the secret police, the most clandestine and paranoid apparatus in Ba‘thist Iraq, therefore suffer abnormally from this liability, this absence of verifiable data. As a result, this section of the paper, which relies significantly on *Republic of Fear* (which already acknowledges its own shortcomings *vis-à-vis* reliable archival material), is less firmly rooted in primary sources. Stories and acts of violence that fill the pages of *Republic of Fear* and that are discussed in this paper may very well be exaggerations or even apocryphal, but their mere existence points to a certain reality in Ba‘thist Iraq in the 1970s – a pervasive atmosphere of violence and the threat of violence, of citizens under constant surveillance, and of the slow strangulation of community politics. As Kanan Makiya writes in *Republic of Fear*, “sometimes the truth content of a particular story is less important than the fact that people have come to believe that it is true.”⁴⁹

The first chief of Internal State Security after the July 1968 coup was Nadhim Kzar, appointed to that position in 1969 by Saddam Husayn. Although many Iraqis involved in the security apparatus of Ba‘thist Iraq are more or less invisible in the sources, many facts are known about Kzar’s tenure as police chief, mainly due to the fact that he was tried and executed in July 1973 along with thirty-five others after a summary

⁴⁸ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 219.

⁴⁹ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, xxxvi.

Party tribunal. Kzar joined the Party in the 1950s and became one of only a few Shi'is to occupy a position of power. He earned a reputation during the first Ba'ath regime as particularly excessive in his violence and even sadism; these excesses continued into the 1970s. Under Kzar, the secret police was reinvigorated (it was largely subservient to the army between 1958 and 1968) and responsible for a significant number of tortured and executed Iraqis, mostly communists and Kurds. Kzar, unsurprisingly, favored a forceful resolution to the Kurdish conflict that raged in northern Iraq in the early 1970s; his agents attempted to assassinate Kurdish political leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani at least twice shortly after the signing of the March 1970 Manifesto, ostensibly an agreement between the Kurdish authority and the regime for Kurdish autonomy and peaceful relations.⁵⁰

Yet Kzar's ambitions were not limited to interrogations and attacks against the political rivals of Ba'athism. In early 1973 he took hostage the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Defense and planned the assassination of President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr. When the assassination failed, Kzar fled to the Iranian border with his hostages and a loyal escort. His convoy, however, was discovered and chased down by helicopter gunships. Kzar was captured, then tried and sentenced to death on July 7, 1973. The episode was used to justify a widespread purge of Ba'ath Party membership.⁵¹

The regime was, understandably, badly disturbed by the attempted coup, but matters became worse shortly after the purges that followed Kzar's arrest and trial. A bizarre series of grisly crimes committed in Baghdad, an area over which the Ba'athists claimed complete control, shook the regime. After all, the ruling Ba'athists had boasted of lower crime rates and of the efficiency of the emergency police (*Shurtat al-Najdah*) who

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵¹ Said K. Aburish, *Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 103-104.

were reputed to be able to arrive at a crime scene in Baghdad within minutes. Such confidence was shattered during a succession of house robberies where entire families were murdered. The perpetrator, nicknamed *Abu al-Tubar* (the hatchet man), and other members of his gang were revealed at his trial to be former members of Kzar's police service who had eluded police capture for so long because of their knowledge of secret police radio frequencies.⁵²

Although stories of Kzar's aborted coup attempt and his crony-turned-serial killer might seem unrelated to the evolution of a police state in Iraq after 1968, they proved incredibly influential not only in the reorganization of the secret police but also in the rhetoric of prominent Ba'athists, most notably Saddam Husayn. At a moment when public confidence in the internal state security apparatus was at an all-time low, Husayn redefined ideas like "citizen," "state," "regime," and, perhaps most importantly, "treason," and, in the process, justified Ba'athism *vis-à-vis* the "treasonous" acts of Kzar and al-Tubar, during a time when Ba'athism could just have easily been blamed for creating such monsters.

In a speech given on September 24, 1973, at the end of the third session of discussions on the Draft Law for the Autonomy of the Iraqi Kurds, Saddam Husayn articulated this new, perversely rational, interpretation of crimes against the state, of the threat of insidious agents inside and outside Iraq, and of the need to monitor the movements of imperialism.

Some people may imagine that the Revolution is unaware of what is happening around it. The Revolution has its eyes wide open. Throughout all its stages, the Revolution will remain capable of performing its role

⁵² Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 7.

courageously and precisely without hesitation or panic, once it takes action to crush the pockets of the counter-revolution. All that we hear and read about, including those crimes which have taken place recently, are new devices to confront the Revolution and exhaust it psychologically. These are not sadistic crimes as some imagine; they are crimes committed by traitorous agents.⁵³

This speech stands as a perfect example of the paradigm shift that took place under the Ba‘thists and Saddam Husayn in the 1970s and beyond. Political legitimacy, under the rhetoric of Ba‘thism, was based on the “Revolution” which was based on “the people.” Therefore to offend against the people, as Kzar and al-Tubar had done, was to undermine the spirit of the Revolution and, by extension, the regime – a treasonous act. In this new upside-down political world, an attack against the people was an attack against the government, and an attack against the government was an attack against the people; the state (which was quickly swallowed up by the Party) *was* the people, and thus inviolable. Still, Husayn needed to deflect responsibility for Kzar and al-Tubar, who, after all, had been state functionaries, while simultaneously justifying the existence of a secret state security force.

However, it is not enough to speak loosely about our forces’ capabilities and concepts or about imperialism. We must know, learn, and accurately monitor the movements of imperialism. We must calculate with foresight the probable development of its plans, forces, and reserves both inside and outside our frontiers. We must be prepared.⁵⁴

Here the absolute necessity of an internal (and politically motivated) security apparatus in Iraq is laid out. This passage, along with the one quoted earlier, warns against

⁵³ Khalid Kishtainy, trans., *On Current Events in Iraq* (London: Longman, 1977), 18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

“imperialism” and the need for a steadfast agency to “know, learn, and...monitor” it. The secret police are the eyes of the Revolution.

That Saddam Husayn survived politically the Kzar scandal is something of a miracle. Husayn, after all, had been the first head of the Ba‘th security services and Kzar was his hand-picked replacement and protégé.⁵⁵ Yet Husayn moved quickly in the immediate aftermath of the Kzar affair to neutralize his political rivals, reassert order among the Ba‘th rank-and-file, and reorganize and modernize the secret police.

First, Husayn implicated his most popular rival in the Party, ‘Abd al-Khaliq al-Samarra’i, a leading ideologue considered the third most popular person in the Party behind President al-Bakr and Husayn. Although al-Samarra’i was only imprisoned and not executed until 1979,⁵⁶ Husayn was successful in marginalizing an important source of potential political competition.

Second, Husayn acted decisively to rein in any rebellious elements in the party militia, many members of which were torn between loyalties to Kzar and to the regime. He personally took command of loyal units of the militia and, quite visibly, tracked down suspected Kzar loyalists and stormed Kzar strongholds. Most importantly, the army was excluded from these proceedings and thus not given an opportunity to insert itself politically into the scandal. As a result, the civilian branch of the Ba‘th Party was largely put back in order.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Aburish, *Saddam Hussein*, 103.

⁵⁶ See Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, page 12 and Aburish, *Saddam Hussein*, pages 173 and 175. President al-Bakr refused to ratify the original execution order. Husayn, after purging al-Bakr in 1979, ordered al-Samarra’i in front of a firing squad, “an act of revenge against a former senior comrade who towered about Saddam intellectually.”

⁵⁷ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 12.

Third, and most relevant to this chapter, Husayn restructured the internal security apparatus of Iraq. The outcome was three agencies, *Amn*, *Istikhbarat*, and *Mukhabarat*, all independently responsible to the RCC.

The *Amn* or State Internal Security, Kzar's old department, was reorganized and updated based on a secret intelligence agreement between Husayn and Yuri Andropov, then head of the KGB. Based on certain clauses of the 1972 Iraqi-Soviet Friendship Treaty (negotiated by Husayn), the agreement called for: a reorganization of all aspects of internal security on the recommendations of the KGB; supply of sophisticated surveillance and interrogation equipment; training for Iraqi personnel in KGB and GRU (Military Intelligence) schools in the Soviet Union; exchange of intelligence information; and assistance by Iraqi embassy personnel to Soviet agents operating in countries where the Soviet Union has no diplomatic relations.⁵⁸

The *Istikhbarat* or Military Intelligence was made responsible for most of the operations against Iraqi or other nationals abroad. It frequently employed embassy personnel, particularly members of the military attaché's office. Although it is still difficult to assess the scope and successful operations of *Istikhbarat*, documents leaked in 1979 revealed an organization committed to intelligence-gathering in foreign capitals, tracking the movements of perceived enemies of Iraq outside its territorial boundaries, and planning and conducting assassinations against such targets.⁵⁹

The *Mukhabarat* or Party Intelligence was the most powerful and feared agency of the three. A "meta-intelligence organization," *Mukhabarat* was designed by Husayn to watch over the other policing networks and control the activities of state institutions like

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

the army, government departments, and mass organizations such as youth, women, and labor. Again, details about this agency are limited, but it appears that membership depended greatly on political loyalty and knowledge of the intricacies of the Party, not on technical expertise or intelligence-gathering ability.⁶⁰

Under Husayn's reorganization, reclassification, and modernization of the internal (and external) security apparatus in Iraq, the secret police transformed from an unstable group of amateur police and interrogators into a professional police force equipped with state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, access to advanced interrogation techniques borrowed from the KGB, and loyal politically to the Ba'ath Party. This loyalty is perhaps the most important change achieved by Husayn. Under Kzar, the police force simply represented the transfer of the unrestrained brutishness of the first Ba'ath coup in 1963 into the existing security apparatus taken over in 1968. In the years after 1968, when technically competent Party members were in short supply, a boss like Kzar had an inordinate amount of authority. Under Husayn's reorganization, the boss became a "faceless party bureaucrat," one of many in a hierarchy of bosses controlling those below and reporting to (and monitoring) those above. Moreover, because all three agencies were staffed by Party loyalists, they became essentially political. The result was not only the absolute control of the state and its people by the Party, but the absolute *consumption* of the state and its people by the Party.

The secret police, however, was only one appendage of the state that the Ba'ath successfully reinvented in the 1970s. The Iraqi army, for much of post-war Iraq an important political force in the country, was also a target for reorganization, purges, and Ba'athification.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

Iraq's Armed Forces

For much of the early twentieth century the Iraqi army acted as a tool of internal repression; its only real engagement with a foreign military force before the Iran-Iraq War took place in May 1941, when it failed to repulse a British force that invaded and reoccupied the country. Iraq dispatched military forces to aid the Palestinians in May 1948, but the army's "legacy of internal coercion," long lines of logistics and communications, and a fractured Arab command meant the Iraqi military was for the most part inactive during the conflict.⁶¹ Similarly, Iraq did not have the opportunity to participate in an active combat role during the Six Day War in 1967, although it belatedly attempted to send forces to the front.⁶²

Throughout the late 1920s and 1930s the Iraqi army officer corps had become gradually politicized, resulting in a group of military men willing to forcibly remove from office appointed and elected officials of the central government whose decision-making and ideology were disconnected from their own. The politicization was the result of several developments within the army: expansion and conscription, which created generational, ethnic, and sectarian cleavages within the army; a growing symbiotic relationship between ideological cliques within the army and the Iraqi intelligentsia; and the growth of nationalist sentiment, whether Arab or Iraqi, in the officer corps.⁶³ Specific events, also, would prove to be instrumental in this politicization: the 1924 military agreement signed between the British and Iraq; the Assyrian crisis of 1933; tribal

⁶¹ Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical history* (London: Routledge, 2008), 65.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 36-41.

insurrection in the middle and lower Euphrates in the mid-1930s; and, finally, the 1936 *coup d'état* by commander of the Iraq army Bakr Sidqi.

Sidqi's successful military coup (and subsequent assassination), however, had not ushered in a military dictatorship, but what has been called a "military moderator regime," essentially an "umpire" in the game of Iraqi domestic politics.⁶⁴ The assassination of Sidqi, perhaps even more than the 1936 *coup d'état*, shifted the center of gravity away from the prime minister and his cabinet to the armed forces. Between 1936 and 1941 a total of five military coups would take place. This era was dominated by seven senior army officers, who had conspired to kill Sidqi and claimed responsibility for the disintegration of his allies' government. Only with their consent could any civilian political authority hope to achieve and remain in power between 1936 and 1941.⁶⁵

Although the monarchy reasserted its control in 1941 and broke up the armed forces,⁶⁶ many of the soldiers who escaped those purges became important players in post-1958 politics.⁶⁷ As a result, military men were again able to seize political power less than twenty years after the reestablishment of the monarchy that the "Second British Occupation"⁶⁸ ushered in 1941. These included General Abd-al Karim Qasim and Colonel Abd al-Salam 'Arif, who led the military action against the monarchy in 1958 and who reigned from 1958-1963 and 1963-1966 respectively, and General Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, who ruled Iraq from 1968-1979.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*.

⁶⁶ See Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 30. By 1941 the army had risen to 1,745 officers and 44, 217 men. Between 1941 and 1942, 324 officers were pensioned off; by 1948, 1,095 other officers were discharged before reaching retirement age.

⁶⁷ See Ahmed Hashim, "Saddam Husayn and Civil-Military Relations in Iraq: The Quest for Legitimacy and Power," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2003): 15. Between 1941 and 1958 there was not a single coup in Iraq, but during that time many nationalist army officers went underground and formed several unrelated anti-regime cells.

⁶⁸ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 345.

Yet, whereas the officers from 1936 and 1941 were a “moderator regime” that prevented the rise of unwelcome governments and replaced one civilian government after another, the Free Officers who carried out the 1958 revolution *became* the government. Bakr Sidqi, after all, did not envision for himself a role beyond influencing politics behind the scenes; he did not even assume the position of Minister of Defense that was offered to him.⁶⁹ The army officers who commanded the institutions of civilian political power after 1958 were entirely different; although they pledged themselves to entrust authority to civilian hands, leaders of the revolution, specifically Qasim and ‘Arif, placed themselves at the head of the new revolutionary regime. As soon as Qasim had taken control, he reorganized the government and filled key positions with army officers. In his cabinet only four of fourteen ministerial positions were commanded by army officers, but those four were among the most important: Premiership, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Social Affairs. Qasim initially publicly maintained that his cabinet was civilian but soon after his ascension, especially once Salam ‘Arif was marginalized, he began making decisions without consulting his cabinet members.⁷⁰

Qasim’s successor, ‘Arif, hardly bothered to maintain a façade of civilian involvement in his government; instead he focused his energies toward consolidating his power in the armed forces and recruiting the economically and religiously conservative sections of society.

It was in this political environment, where military officers commanded units and filled governmental posts, that Ba‘thists staged another military coup. What happened to the military under Ba‘thist rule starting in 1968 was unlike the “moderator regimes” of

⁶⁹ Al-Marashi, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 51.

⁷⁰ Majid Khadduri, *Republican Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics Since the Revolution of 1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 68-69.

1936-1941 or the “ruler regimes” of 1958-1968; the army was torn down and rebuilt along Party lines and Party loyalties. The conditions that brought army officers into politics beginning in the 1930s were removed as was the ideology that allowed them to seize power in the 1960s. In short, the army became, under Ba‘thism, a creature of the Party

Three developments explain this metamorphosis. First, the regime conducted a comprehensive series of purges designed to remove from the army its high-ranking officers who might disrupt Party operations or challenge those in power for political authority in Iraq. Purges began with officers who had played an important role in the overthrow of the ‘Arif regime but had refused to become Ba‘thists (Nayef, Daud, Ansari, Uqaili); then officers with Ba’thist loyalties whose base of power was in the armed forces (Hardan al-Tikriti, ‘Ammash, Naqib, Nasrat); then, finally, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and his supporters in 1979.⁷¹ Any officer whose loyalties were in question, particularly those with suspected Nasserist, Syrian, or Communist affiliations, were purged from the military and replaced with Ba‘thist officers regardless of their military experience. By the end of 1970, three thousand Ba‘thists were granted military ranks.⁷² Furthermore, a network of Ba‘th Party organizers was set up in every military unit with several responsibilities: propaganda for the objectives of the “revolution and party”; surveillance of “hostile elements”; and immediate reports to the Party of the “trends” and “moves” of such elements.⁷³

⁷¹ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 25.

⁷² Al-Marashi, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, 112-114.

⁷³ A. Abbas, “The Iraqi Armed Forces, Past and Present” in *Saddam’s Iraq: Revolution or Reaction?* (London: Committee Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq, 1986), 217.

Second, the regime instituted a new system of accountability wherein junior Ba‘thist officers could disobey the orders of their senior non-Ba‘thist counterparts if they suspected them. Thus a parallel authority developed among the officers corps: party members who graduated from the Military College were instructed not to carry out important orders without Party approval. As a result, military officers were denied the kind of group loyalty that had proved instrumental in its forays into politics in the 1930s and 1960s; military identities were subordinated to Party policy.⁷⁴

Third, ideology unsympathetic to Ba‘thism was separated from the military. Comprehensive Party organization within the ranks of the military removed the idea from the minds of officers that the army could intervene on behalf of the Iraqi nation when its national identity was in jeopardy. Because the regime and the Party claimed to represent the Iraqi nation and its people, and because increasingly the Military Academy was restricted to Ba‘th Party members, the rationale historically used by army officers to seize political power disappeared. The army, because of purges, forced retirements, restructuring, and Ba‘thist social organization, became another organ of the Party, and military coups became a thing of the past.⁷⁵

The aim of all these measures was to transform fundamentally the role of the army in Iraqi society and avoid the emergence of a military identity capable of threatening the hegemony of the Party. Its success is well illustrated by the composition of the RCC, the ruling body in Ba‘thist Iraq: in 1968 the RCC was composed exclusively

⁷⁴ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 26.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

of Sunni officers;⁷⁶ by June 1982, it included only a single member from the ranks of the army.⁷⁷

In an April 8, 1974 interview with Arab and foreign journalists, Husayn explained the status of the army in Ba‘thist Iraq. The violence and ugliness of the purges are, expectedly, omitted, but the end result is accurately described.

There is a tank unit a few scores of metres away from this place. An unarmed civilian cannot face up to a tank. This unit which is stationed here on guard duty might launch an attack against the regime. In such an eventuality, all of us unarmed individuals from the President of the Republic down to the most junior members of the Party would be unable to stand against this weapon. But the weapon is in our hands and other weapons are in our hands also, because those who are in charge of these arms realise and believe that the people who are entrusted with steering the affairs of the country are moving in the right direction, in which they themselves believe, in everything from the daily working details to the strategic objectives.⁷⁸

What had been a constant danger to civilian governments in the 1930s and the ideology and means that had allowed the army to waltz in and out of government in the 1960s was gone. The Iraqi armed forces, like the secret police, the Party militia, and the bureaucracy, had become so swollen with Ba‘thist loyalists that the idea of staging a coup became counter-productive. Moreover, the bizarre system of checks and balances that interrupted the traditional military chain of command made group loyalties that might otherwise have flourished in pre-Ba‘thist Iraq impossible. Officers either pledged their allegiance to the regime or became candidates for termination or early retirement.

⁷⁶ See Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), 212. The original members of the RCC were all military men, and military men occupied the four most important cabinet posts: president, prime minister, minister of defense, minister of the interior.

⁷⁷ May Chartouni-Dubarry, “The Development of Internal Politics in Iraq from 1958 to the Present Day” in *Iraq: Power and Society*, ed. by Derek Hopwood, Habib Ishow, and Thomas Koszinowski (Oxford: St. Antony’s College, 1993), 31.

⁷⁸ Kishtainy, *On Current Events in Iraq*, 53.

Yet despite the comprehensive reimagining and restructuring of the secret police, the army, and other government offices, the Iraq of Saddam Husayn was not merely one of innovations. Ba‘thism benefitted from the decades-old institutional weaknesses of modern Iraq, and from its political legacy of patronage and nepotism.

Conclusion

That Saddam Husayn survived the eight-year war with its neighbor Iran, which had claimed the lives of roughly 250,000 Iraqis and put Iraq over \$80 billion in debt, an invasion of Kuwait, and the March-April 1991 Intifada is testimony to his own resilience and the weakness of the Iraqi state, the institutions of which offered zero possibilities to remove Husayn peaceably from office. Indeed, only foreign military intervention in 2003 ultimately proved capable of toppling Saddam Husayn.

Husayn’s Iraq reinforced the institutional weaknesses which had characterized every Iraqi regime post-World War I. Although civil society and representational government continued in a meager and symbolic way, true power emanated from the office and person of the President. Government agencies, bureaucracies and, statewide organizations continued to function, but beneath them ran a long chain of patrons and clients: the real power brokers of Husayn’s Iraq.

When a faction or group did become too ambitious, it was dealt with in one of two ways: 1) summarily arrested, tortured, exiled or killed or 2) induced into the established system of alliances and patronage. In this way, like his predecessors, Husayn controlled the hierarchies of tribal *shaykhs* and of Kurdish notables, all the while persuading them to deliver the loyalty of their tribesmen or soldiers to the necessary

leader. The most cooperative tribal and regional leaders were rewarded with land rights, promotions, and important resources.

This system of cooptation was an immovable impediment for those in Iraq working to undermine Husayn. These insurgents had to contend not only with the brutal violence and oppression of the regime but also the institutions that allowed Husayn to co-opt large portions of the Iraqi population, thereby destabilizing any real popular support for their cause.

Chapter Two: Shi'i Political Resistance

The focus of this chapter is those Shi'is who became politically active in modern Iraq, beginning as early as the end of the eighteenth century. It will look principally at the trajectory of political involvement in domestic and international issues on the part of Shi'i religious leaders, those *mujtahids* granted the authority, by way of their training and education, to interpret the holy texts of Islam and to guide the community of Muslims. It will focus specifically on their role in the formation, mutation, and leadership of *Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiya*, a religious-political movement born in the shrine cities of southern Iraq in 1958, an association that carried on a legacy of Shi'i political opposition to the ruling class in Iraq but that met its most powerful enemy in secular, pan-Arab Ba'athism that reigned in Iraq from 1968 to 2003. The years between 1958 and 1980, when the spiritual leadership of *al-Da'wa* was destroyed and members were forced underground, are of principal interest. What will become apparent, hopefully, in the following pages is that Shi'is are in many ways politically unique – Shi'is are at least partially politically subservient to their religious authorities – and that Iraqi Shi'is are similarly unique: torn between political loyalty to the government in Baghdad and the Islamic seminaries in the shrine cities and possessing sympathy both to Iraq and neighboring Iran, from which many *mujtahids* claim descent. The trials of modernity, of imperial European expansionism, and of Marxism simply complicated the actions of a religious community ideologically predisposed to combat secularism. That ideological predisposition, combined with lessons learned from militant Islamic groups in Iraq and beyond, and the initiative of junior clerics in Najaf, led to the creation of *al-Da'wa*, a movement that

became, after the fall of communism and the rise of secular, pan-Arab Ba‘thism, the most potent organization capable of defending Islamic values and Shi‘i civil rights in Iraq.

Clerical Political Activism between Iran and Iraq

Although the main focus of this chapter will be the years in Iraq during and after the 1958 revolution, it is important to comment on clerical activism before the formation of *al-Da‘wa*. That political party did not emerge from a political and religious vacuum after all; Shi‘i clerics in southern Iraq for much of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries – indeed for much of their existence as a discrete religious community – waged a theological battle among themselves between activism and quietism, the belief that religious leaders should not involve themselves in politics but rather embrace a distinct spiritual authority. Both activism and quietism, alternatively endorsed by religious schools and leading grand ayatollahs, had foundations in traditional Shi‘i political theory. The nineteenth century, however, was one of increasing political activism on the part of Iraqi *mujtahids*. The reasons for this are many, and will be recounted below.

The emergence of the *mujtahids* as a political force in Iraq (and also Iran) in the first quarter of the twentieth century was the result of several intellectual, legal, and technological factors that find their origins in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first, legal factor was the revival of the Usuli legal school⁷⁹ and its establishment as the authoritative method of Shi‘i jurisprudence in the late eighteenth century. With the assertion of Usuli legal dominance in Iraq came greater clarity regarding the juristic role

⁷⁹ See Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), page 16. Many of the Usulis, now the dominant group among Twelver Shi‘is, were rationalist Persian ‘*ulama*’ who arrived in Iraq between 1722 and 1763, and rose to prominence within the Shi‘i religious establishment over the more traditionalist Akhbaris.

of *mujtahids* along with several important theological rulings; the Usuli School, for example, forbade the imitation of deceased authorities, granting more power and authority to living, breathing *mujtahids*.⁸⁰

The Usuli victory over their principal rivals the Akhbaris greatly enhanced the legal reach of Shi‘i *mujtahids*,⁸¹ but also had importance economic implications: it provided a legal justification for the diversion of money from laypeople to the clerical class. Where the Akhbaris had discredited the claims of *mujtahids* to the *khums* (religious taxes), the Usuli School maintained that *mujtahids*, as representatives of the hidden imam, could perform duties normally reserved for him, including the collection of half of the *khums*. This arrangement was represented famously by Najafi *mujtahid* Shaykh Ja‘far Kashif al-Ghita who, during his visits to Iran, collected *khums* and was said to consider anyone who withheld taxes an enemy of the imam and his representatives. Al-Ghita would later donate the imam’s share of the *khums* to the Shah of Iran for the entire duration of the Perso-Russian War (1810-1813), a very early example of the politicization of the religious scholars of southern Iraq.⁸²

The growing political activism in Shi‘i Islam was also a product of the ideas introduced by modernist Islamic thinkers of the nineteenth century. The ideas of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), and Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935), among others, were gradually transmitted to the shrine cities and developed a life of their own among the students and ‘*ulama* of the seminaries of southern Iraq. These

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸¹ See Elie Kedourie, “The Iraqi Shi‘is and Their Fate” in *Shi‘ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, ed. Martin Kramer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 137. The Usuli victory over the Akhbaris “enormously enhanced” the standing of the *mujtahids* and allowed for the emergence of an influential hierarchy of religious learning independent of outside political authority.

⁸² Nakash, *Shi‘is of Iraq*, 207.

ideas included, but were not limited to: ideas of patriotism to one's country (*watan*) as distinct from a believer's responsibility toward the *umma* (Islamic community); the importance of intra-Muslim unity in the face of European expansionism and imperialism; and the urgent need to revivify Islam and reconcile it with modernity.⁸³ Ideas of Muslim unity above all else, mainly posited by al-Afghani,⁸⁴ surely must have influenced the clerical class in Najaf in the events that constitute the 1920 revolt, during which Sunnis and Shi'is collaborated in unprecedented ways to prevent Iraq from being controlled by British forces.

Technological advances, specifically the introduction of the telegraph in Iraq and Iran in the 1860s, also led directly to a greater concentration of power and influence in the hands of a few leading Iraqi *mujtahids*. Telegraph communications between *mujtahids* in Iraq and their constituents in Iran had two important ramifications: 1) frequent contact between the parties increased the authoritative status of the *mujtahids* and 2) financial backers in Iran started to push the Shi'i scholars in the shrine cities to engage more in worldly affairs. Soon after, Iraqi *mujtahids* became more and more politically involved in Iranian domestic and international affairs.

There was also a geopolitical component to the combination of religious authority and political maneuvering in the shrine cities of southern Iraq. Unlike the clerical class in Iran, which enjoyed a privileged relationship with the state, Iraqi *mujtahids* were not integrated into a formal governmental hierarchy. In Iraq, in the absence of effective state control, the *mujtahids* more or less regulated themselves; they behaved like "free

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸⁴ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

electrons” competing for resources, influence, and sometimes political power.⁸⁵ This geographic distance from Iranian sovereigns, along with the emergence of Najaf as an “extra-territorial pole of Shia religious authority,” and the lack of any meaningful state control by Ottoman sovereigns meant that the relationship between Iraqi *mujtahids* and the Qajar dynasty, for much of the nineteenth century marked by quietism and cooperation,⁸⁶ would become much more confrontational.⁸⁷

Although the *‘ulama* of the shrine cities were principally involved in Iranian worldly affairs up to the First World War, they participated actively in various political episodes leading up to the formation of the modern Iraqi nation-state. Although Shi‘i scholars had been anxious to keep the Ottomans at a safe distance, they decided to side with the empire following the landing of British troops in Iraq in 1914, preferring coexistence with a Sunni overlord than face the prospect of foreign and un-Islamic occupation. They issued *fatwas* (religious edicts) urging the local population to join the Ottoman army and even led tribal militias into battle against British armed force, dealing heavy losses to British troops. These events recall the ideas introduced by Islamic modernists in the nineteenth century, namely the necessity of united action against the West. Although Shi‘i clerics considered Ottoman rulers *mughtasibun* (usurpers) they urged their followers to wage war against the British under the Ottoman flag.⁸⁸

After the fall and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and the creation of modern Iraq from three former Ottoman provinces, the *‘ulama* petitioned the League of Nations and demanded the creation of an independent Iraq governed according to Islamic

⁸⁵ Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 73.

⁸⁶ Nakash, *Shi‘is of Iraq*, 49.

⁸⁷ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 79

⁸⁸ Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 42-43.

law and the rulings of the *mujtahids*. When the British occupation of Iraq was officially approved as a Mandate by the League of Nations in 1920, Shi‘i clerics helped launch a revolt.⁸⁹

Although the events and trends recounted above are several decades removed from the formation of *al-Da‘wa*, the legacy of clerical involvement in domestic and international politics that began in the nineteenth century as a result of new, modernist political theory, technological breakthroughs, and the initiative of individual *mujtahids* gave junior clerics in the late 1950s an intellectual and theological foundation from which to launch a never-before-seen political movement. Yet, as important as internal factors were to the politicization of the *mujtahids*, external factors, especially European expansion into the Middle East, radicalized Iraqi scholars to a certain degree. The British mandate, the new Iraqi monarchy, and the advent of minority Sunni rule in modern Iraq similarly radicalized the clerical class. Obvious political inequality, economic starvation, and the growth of ideologies inimical to Islam in twentieth-century Iraq would all prove to be significant prerequisites for the formation of *al-Da‘wa*. Most, if not all, of those trends can be traced back to the failure of the 1920 Revolt, an event with serious ramifications for Shi‘i political consciousness and mobility in modern Iraq and for the long-term viability of the *hawza*, the traditional center of Islamic learning in southern Iraq.

Political Conflict and Cooperation between Iraqi Sunnis and Shi‘is

The revolt that occurred in 1920 is still something of a mystery to students of the modern Middle East and specifically to students of modern Iraq. The nature of the revolt,

⁸⁹ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 80-81.

the tribes, political blocs, and cities that took part in the revolt, the motivations of those groups, and the extent of Sunni-Shi‘i collaboration are only some of the historical questions historians continue to contemplate. Answers to these questions exist in a variety of interpretations composed by Shi‘i writers of different backgrounds and loyalties about the nature and origins of the revolt.⁹⁰ Many Shi‘is who participated in the revolt and who later held ministerial positions under the monarchy emphasized the national dimension of the revolt and the leading role of cities, particularly Karbala, Najaf, and, to a lesser extent, Baghdad; Shi‘i communists portrayed the revolt, in their accounts, as an example of Iraqi masses standing up bravely to foreign imperialism; and religious leaders highlighted the importance of *mujtahids* in organizing, leading, and providing the ideological underpinnings to the revolt.⁹¹ It remains difficult to say whether the revolt represented the precedence of religious sentiment over nationalist aspiration (or vice-versa) or simply self-determination versus imperialism (most likely all these factors and more inspired Iraqis of very different ideological inclinations to raise arms against the British), but what seems clear among all the conflicting narratives is that the Shi‘i *‘ulama* played a decisive role, indirect or otherwise, in inciting the tribes to revolt against British rule in Iraq. In fact, even those *shaykhs* that would become large landowners under the monarchy after the failure of the revolt, those who provided a “shaikhly anchor” for British policy during the mandate, participated in the events of 1920 in large part because of the relationship between their tribesmen and the Shi‘i *‘ulama* of Najaf and Karbala.

⁹⁰ See Nakash, *Shi‘is of Iraq*, 74-75. Some writers, including Fariq al-Muzhir Al Fir‘awn, the leader of a subsection of the Al Fatla tribe, highlighted the importance of the southern Euphrates region during the revolt, while some Shi‘is in Najaf and Karbala emphasized the importance of their cities in the revolt. Najafis went so far as to argue that the 1920 revolt was an extension of a smaller rebellion in Najaf two years earlier.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

The powerful influence the clerical class exercised over the “rank-and-file” tribesmen of the middle and lower Euphrates made it difficult for tribal chiefs of those areas, regardless of their loyalties and status, to disobey calls to arms from the shrine cities.⁹²

In any event, the revolt was, from the indigenous Iraqi point of view, a failure – British forces in October 1920 regained control over the central and lower Euphrates and defeated the tribesmen fighting there. As mentioned above, Shi‘is experienced a particularly devastating blow; despite their numerical superiority they were denied important positions in the new government and in the growing bureaucracy and civil service. The authority and freedom of movement of Shi‘i *mujtahids* was perhaps damaged even more, in large part because subsequent generations of Sunni rulers in Iraq were able to 1) successfully achieve a separation between religion and state in Iraq and 2) limit the spread of Shi‘ism in the country.⁹³ By separating religion and state, the Sunni rulers of Iraq, during and after the monarchy, were able to invest political authority in Baghdad and the expense of the southern shrine cities. By limiting Shi‘i conversion in Iraq, they were able to shrink the size of the *mujtahids*’ constituency. Members of the monarchy and of successive Sunni cabinets were also successful in splitting the *mujtahids* from their most important military and economic assets: Shi‘i tribal *shaykhs*. Where *mujtahids* were disenfranchised, exiled, and systematically stripped of political power, Shi‘i *shaykhs* were offered political and economic incentives, transforming them into political players who benefited from the status quo.⁹⁴

The failure of the 1920 revolt forever altered the political landscape of the modern Iraqi nation-state. Where Shi‘is had been Ottoman subjects before the end of World War

⁹² Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 82.

⁹³ Nakash, *Shi‘is of Iraq*, 88.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, they became, during the first decade of the Iraqi monarchy, more or less removed from the institutions of power in Iraq, disenfranchised in favor of Sunni Arabs and their British benefactors. Even during the 1930s, when Shi'is began to push a particular agenda through parliament, and the 1940s, when more and more young, educated Shi'is began to compete with Sunnis for government and bureaucratic positions, the balance of power shifted obviously and seemingly irreparably in favor of the Sunni population of Iraq. There were brief moments of intra-Muslim cooperation, most famously in 1920 and to some extent in 1935, but these were exceptions to the rule of Sunni Arab political dominance. In addition to the growing political imbalance between Shi'is and Sunnis was a widening gulf between lay Shi'is and *mujtahids*. After the failure of the 1920 revolt, several Shi'i clerics were exiled or chose voluntarily to relocate to Iran, where they were unable to alter the course of Iraqi domestic politics. Those who stayed in Iraq were systematically marginalized from the political process.⁹⁵ Without any significant political or religious leadership from the shrine cities in southern Iraq after the revolt, many Shi'is attempted to reconcile their lives with the political realities of modern Iraq, turning first to constitutional means and non-violent protest, then to violent rebellion, and finally to radical options like communism and, eventually, political Islam.

Political opposition of all kinds emerged more obviously and more organized in the years between the beginning of World War II and the 1958 Revolution. A new generation, more politically-minded and better equipped to oppose the institutionalized power structure of Iraq entered public life, and in the process dramatically expanded the public sphere. Communists were especially successful in creating an "illegal public

⁹⁵ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 81.

sphere” and in their counter-hegemonic struggle against the state.⁹⁶ The Shi‘i critique against the Sunni rulers of Iraq also changed in these years of widespread social unrest and sometimes violent opposition: it not only decried the misrepresentation of Shi‘is in government and in the civil service, but also opposed the government’s social policies and its foreign policy decisions.⁹⁷ These trends acted largely as a prelude to 1958, set the stage for communist control (however brief), the first rumblings of organized Islamic resistance, and finally the emergence of *al-Da‘wa* as an oppositionist group.

Reactions to Marxism, Secularism, and the Decline of the Hawza

The exact date of the formation of *Hizb al-Da‘wa al-Islamiya* (the Islamic Call Party) is still a subject of debate. Most place the date sometime in 1957 or 1958, but others, including Vali Nasr, argue *al-Da‘wa* was founded in 1967.⁹⁸ The vast majority of evidence, however, points to the inescapable fact that the formation of *al-Da‘wa* was a direct response to the changes the 1958 revolution represented and effected in Iraq.

The revolution had far-reaching economic, political, and religious implications for all of Iraq, but the traditional Shi‘i religious establishment in southern Iraq experienced the revolution and its aftermath in a uniquely negative way, in no small part due to the popularity and political power of Marxism in Iraq during and immediately after the revolution. Although Marxism had been steadily growing as an alternative ideology in Iraq for twenty years, the 1958 revolution and the months that followed represented the height of popular interest in and political power of the Iraqi Communist Party, founded in

⁹⁶ Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, -102.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹⁸ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 117.

1934. The formation of *al-Da'wa* represented a reaction to the rise of communism (indeed all secular ideologies) in Iraq and the corresponding lack of interest in conservative Islamic ideology. Marxism spoke to the poorer and newly urbanized segments of Shi'i society but also to the young clerical class; many sons of *mujtahid* left the *hawza*, the traditional center of Islamic learning in southern Iraq, to join the social revolution.⁹⁹

For the clerical class in southern Iraq, communism represented a social, religious, political, and economic challenge to Islam, both as a faith and a legal authority. The extent of popular participation in communist-led political life was unprecedented during and after the revolution and profoundly affected the popularity and political power of the clerics. For example, the pilgrimage to the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf in 1959, immediately following the revolution, registered its lowest numbers ever; only a few hundred pilgrims visited the shrine cities that year, where tens of thousands had visited in previous years.¹⁰⁰ There was also a sense among the *'ulama* that the religious sense of their constituents was weakening. In 1918, approximately 6,000 students attended the theological schools in Najaf; by 1957 that number had declined to 1,953, only 326 of whom were Iraqis. For many clerics, the old faith was receding, and being replaced with skepticism and sometimes disdain for traditional Shi'i rites.¹⁰¹

The growing lay interest in communist-led politics and subsequent lack of interest in all things Islamic represented not only a spiritual and political defeat for the Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities in southern Iraq; the popularity of secular ideologies had

⁹⁹ Laurence Louër, *Shia Politics*, 83.

¹⁰⁰ Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: SAQI, 2003), 75.

¹⁰¹ Hanna Batatu, "Shi'i Organizations in Iraq: Al-Da'wa al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin" in *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, eds. Juan R.I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 188-199.

important economic implications for the clerical class. Because the religious institutions of southern Iraq relied in large part on voluntary donations from religious believers, the increasing disinterest in Islam meant less material resources.¹⁰² Laws passed by the new regime in Baghdad similarly damaged the economic and political standing of clerics and their closest lay allies: the merchants in the shrine cities and tribal *shaykhs*. Merchants in Najaf, Karbala, and elsewhere whose revenues were tied to the uninterrupted flow of pilgrims in southern Iraq were, on one hand, dealt a severe financial blow by the rise of secularism and the popularity of Marxism. The dissolution of parliament and the upper house, on the other hand, meant a loss of esteem for tribal *shaykhs* (many of them Shi‘i), traditionally allies of the clerics. Agrarian reforms and the abolition of the Tribal Dispute Act similarly destroyed the power, wealth, and legal authority of tribal *shaykhs* in the countryside.¹⁰³ Suddenly the clerics had lost a social class that had been one of their largest political and economic¹⁰⁴ supporters.

Actions taken by the Qasim regime also dealt powerful blows to the social and religious authority of the clerical class in Najaf and beyond. The family law reform, which suggested equal rights for women, the imposition of monogamy, and the regulation of other private, familial actions, was another setback for clerics and other conservatives.¹⁰⁵

The changes effected by Qasim and his political associates once in power were in many ways the culmination of several trends in Iraq during the majority of the twentieth century: the declining status of the *‘ulama* in Najaf and beyond, diminishing attendance

¹⁰² Louër, *Shia Politics*, 83.

¹⁰³ Jabar, *The Shi‘ite Movement in Iraq*, 75-76.

¹⁰⁴ Tribal *shaykhs*, until the propagation of Qasim’s socioeconomic reforms, had been a source of large *khums* (religious taxes) to the clerical class.

¹⁰⁵ Jabar, *The Shi‘ite Movement in Iraq*, 76.

in theological seminaries, decreasing revenue in the form of *khums* (religious taxes), and general socioeconomic setbacks in the shrine cities.¹⁰⁶ How the clerical class and their mercantile allies in southern Iraq responded to these political, religious, economic, and social challenges is the subject of this chapter.

The first response was launched by what became the *Society of 'Ulama* in Najaf, composed of the older generation of conservative Shi'i clerics. The movement was focused primarily on education and philanthropy; it supported revivifying and extending *madrasas* (religious schools), expanding social services, and disseminating publications that attacked atheism and supported conservative Islam. The second, and by far the more politically-motivated response came from reform-minded junior clerics and lay activists from Shi'i mercantile families. It supported a universal Islamic ideology to replace Marxism and a modern political apparatus to make it happen. This is the origin of *Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiya*, a movement that, from its beginning, faced significant opposition from middle and working-class secularism across Iraq and from apolitical conservatism in the seminaries of southern Iraq.

It is important, here, to distinguish *al-Da'wa* from other Islamist organizations of the modern Middle East; it was not, for example, simply an Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood. Although *al-Da'wa* eventually borrowed many of the methods and structures of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, its origins in the religious schools in Najaf and other shrine cities bestowed upon it an allegiance to senior clerics and traditional Islamic law even as it was politically active; in other words, *al-Da'wa* was in its embryonic stage the political expression of the *hawza*, the seminary of traditional Shi'i Islamic studies in Iraq, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood became the social and political expression of the young,

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

educated, religiously-conservative middle and lower-middle classes in Egypt. This is easily the largest difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and *al-Da'wa* which otherwise share many methods, ideologies, and rhetorical devices: the former was created by devout laymen who fiercely criticized the religious establishment; the latter was composed by junior clerics intimately involved with the Shi'i religious establishment in southern Iraq.

That is not to say that the first organizers of *al-Da'wa* simply reiterated and reinforced traditional Shi'i religious doctrines; *al-Da'wa* adopted a distinctly reformist and modernist stance *vis-à-vis* the religious establishment. The statutes of the party, written by Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr, who quickly became the face of *al-Da'wa*, contained innovations which many of the senior clerics in Najaf considered deviations from Islamic doctrine. One of the most controversial ideas introduced by al-Sadr was the concept of dual authority: members of *al-Da'wa* owed allegiance to both the leadership of the organization and to the Grand Ayatollahs in Najaf; he proposed the idea of *wilayet al-umma*, whereby God transferred worldly power from the prophets to the community of people.¹⁰⁷ Another sign of the modernism of *al-Da'wa* was its communications with the Sunni Islamist movements in Iraq, including the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood was specifically mentioned in al-Sadr's statutes as an organization to emulate and surpass; the works of Hasan al-Banna were included in the indoctrination program for new members.¹⁰⁸

This somewhat paradoxical situation – in which *al-Da'wa* refused to emulate the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood but borrowed many of its organizational features –

¹⁰⁷ Nicolas Pelham, *A New Muslim Order: The Shia and the Middle East Sectarian Crisis* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 15.

¹⁰⁸ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 85.

speaks loudly about its ability both to survive (partially underground) among oppressive governments and its ability to recruit successfully among disgruntled Iraqis frustrated with the political and religious situation in Iraq during the 1960s and 1970s. It also demonstrates the uniqueness of *al-Da'wa*, an organization bound by Islamic law and patterns of authority but committed also, to varying degrees during its political evolution, to revolutionary change.

Although *al-Da'wa* owed its existence to junior Shi'ī clerics who sought to defend and revivify Islam against the rising tide of secular ideologies in Iraq, the 1960s saw many scholars abdicate their leadership positions within the movement in order to dedicate themselves to their religious careers. More and more, the core membership of *al-Da'wa* was drawn from young, educated laymen. Over 1,500 copies of the official *al-Da'wa* journal, the *Sawt al-Da'wa*, were distributed to supporters in the University of Baghdad alone.¹⁰⁹ This trend away from clerical authority and toward lay control was explained and exacerbated by the political climate in Iraq in the 1960s. In 1963 the regime of 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif undertook a brutal suppression of the secular organizations which had attracted many young, educated Shi'īs: the Communist Party and the Ba'th Party. The regime of 'Arif was intensely sectarian, relying on the Sunni-dominated army and powerful Sunni landowning clans, and excluding political minorities like the Shi'īs. This trend was to be continued by Saddam Husayn and the Ba'th party who came to power in 1968. Suddenly, *al-Da'wa* became the most potent political organization capable of defending Shi'ī interests in Baghdad and beyond.¹¹⁰ Its ideology rallied not only against secularism but also the institutionalized power structure of

¹⁰⁹ T.M. Aziz, "The Role of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1993): 211.

¹¹⁰ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 86.

modern Iraq which, since 1920, had been dominated by Sunni Muslims, the numerical minority.¹¹¹

Through the 1960s, the membership of *al-Da'wa* attempted to revive Islam through print media; *al-Da'wa* published books and booklets explaining Islam's answer to issues relevant to the working classes of Iraq, including the rights of workers and the redistribution of wealth. Propaganda was often supplemented with public works projects, including religious schools and charitable associations.¹¹² Most, if not all, of these writings and social welfare projects were addressed and provided to Iraqi Muslims in general and not specifically to Shi'is; unlike the Society of Scholars, organized by senior clerics in 1960, *al-Da'wa* was aimed at a much wider constituency.¹¹³ As a result, *al-Da'wa* was particularly effective in targeting young lay people, who the movement saw as the driver of societal change, and working class Shi'is from the impoverished eastern Baghdad area. There was also an effort to recruit female members; this mission was largely undertaken by al-Sadr's sister Bint al-Huda, who organized groups for pious women.¹¹⁴

Apart from print media, the founding members of *al-Da'wa* engaged in a series of lectures and conferences in Najaf and eastern Baghdad ostensibly for religious purposes but in reality a means to recruit pious, young laymen to their cause. Potential recruits were introduced to the movement by "callers," *al-Da'wa* members who would enlist family members, classmates, and fellow soldiers.¹¹⁵ Callers gave potential recruits

¹¹¹ Pelham, *A New Muslim Order*, 15.

¹¹² Louër, *Shia Politics*, 85.

¹¹³ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 196-197.

¹¹⁴ Rodger Shanahan, "Shi'a Political Development in Iraq: The Case of the Islamic Da'wa Party," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2004): 945.

¹¹⁵ Only practicing Muslims were considered for recruitment.

religious literature and, perhaps more importantly, a sense of self-respect; as practicing Muslims, recruits and their families were highly esteemed.¹¹⁶

The efforts to expand *al-Da'wa* within and eventually outside of Najaf were assigned to several important disciples. Abd al-Sahib Dakhil was responsible for spreading the religious message of *al-Da'wa* in Iraqi universities; Shaykh Arif al-Basri was responsible for the spiritual guidance of Baghdad's newest members; al-Sadr's sister Bint al-Huda, a respected *'alima* (female religious scholar), was, as mentioned above, responsible for recruiting pious women into the movement; Sayyid Mahdi al-Hakim functioned as mediator between the clerical authorities in Najaf and the callers in Baghdad.¹¹⁷

Although the founding members of *al-Da'wa*, during the 1960s, made slow progress among young, educated, and working-class Iraqis, their fledgling political movement faced significant opposition from secularists and clerical traditionalists. The first, secular challenge came from Qasim's supporters and from communists who dismissed the members of *al-Da'wa* as reactionaries. By 1959, communists had made themselves indispensable to President Qasim, a former army officer with little popular support before the revolution, and subsequently extended their power and influence across Iraq. During Qasim's reign, communists had enough freedom of movement to spread propaganda via Iraqi print media and radio, create a presence in student groups, and directly or indirectly control important segments of several governmental ministries. The ICP could mobilize members and supporters at short notice, also, filling the streets with a significant visual reminder of their prestige, and partially control access to

¹¹⁶ Joyce N. Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 38.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Qasim.¹¹⁸ From this position of power communists could attack *al-Da'wa* and its perceived Islamic militancy as a regression. Many communist leaders, in more conciliatory overtures, mobilized sympathetic *'ulama* to stress the compatibility of Islam and socialism; they also, via communist newspapers, attacked "hostility to the republic under the cloak of religion," but cautiously refrained from attacking Islam by name.¹¹⁹

The second, religious challenge came from the conservative religious establishment in southern Iraq, namely senior *'ulama* from Najaf and those from Karbala, led by Hassan Shirazi. Many senior clerics objected to *al-Da'wa* on philosophical and practical grounds. A large number of traditionalist, conservative Shi'i *'ulama* embraced quietism and thus argued against *al-Da'wa* based on Shi'i doctrine: the call for establishing an Islamic state contradicts the *Shari'a*, which demands quietism until the return of the Hidden Imam. *Al-Da'wa* members' focus on Islamic utopianism and a mundane political party to achieve that goal was therefore anathema to the traditionalist camp. Practically, senior *'ulama* feared that *al-Da'wa* would represent a source of competition with the *hawza* and vie for diminishing material resources and popular support.¹²⁰

Shirazi, based in Karbala, issued a different kind of doctrinal argument: militancy is allowed by the *Shari'a*, but must be endorsed by a *fatwa* (religious edict) and led by a supreme *mujtahid* who enjoys *wilaya 'amma* (general command). The Karbala group

¹¹⁸ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 135.

¹¹⁹ Uriel Dann, *Iraq Under Qassem: A Political History, 1958-1963* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1969), 145.

¹²⁰ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 85.

therefore had no general reservations about party politics, but was still opposed to the methodology of *al-Da'wa*.¹²¹

The above doctrinal and theological arguments were often combined with concentrated attacks against prominent members of *al-Da'wa*. Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was, more often than not, the main target. He was accused of Sunni heresies and his treatise of *fiqh* was derided as “superficial” and “shallow.”¹²² This latter criticism was perhaps the most devastating for a junior jurist who was endeavoring to create a universal Islamic ideology to replace communism.

Al-Sadr and his Philosophy

Despite heavy criticism leveled against him from clerical conservatives, al-Sadr was successful in defining and outlining the meaning, purpose, and doctrinal status of *al-Da'wa* in its formative years (1960-1964). He was responsible in 1960 for writing *al-Usus* (the Foundations or Fundamentals), the intellectual framework of *al-Da'wa* that was later approved by the founding members. In many ways *al-Usus* was al-Sadr's answer to *The Communist Manifesto*; it outlined, among other things, 1) the establishment of a modern organization to broadcast the party's ideology and effect its mission, 2) a categorization of stages of activity leading to the fulfillment of its goals, and 3) the concept of the Islamic state as the ultimate goal of *al-Da'wa*.¹²³

Besides writing the founding manifesto of *al-Da'wa*, al-Sadr distinguished himself as the author of important treatises on contemporary Islamic thought, including *Falsafatuna* (Our Philosophy) in 1959, in which he deconstructed Marxist theory, and

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 78.

Iqtisaduna (Our Economics) in 1961, in which he explained his idea of Islamic theory of political economy. By publishing these books, along with later religious and political treatises, al-Sadr prompted a debate within scholarly and lay circles about the resilience of Islam, the independence of Islamic theory, and its place among the myriad challenges of the modern world. In his models, Islam was a third way of government, beyond capitalism and socialism.¹²⁴ It is important to note that al-Sadr reserved most of his criticism in *Our Philosophy* and *Our Economics* for Marxism, particularly “dialectical materialism.” Al-Sadr writes in *Our Philosophy*: “Reflect on how nonsensical the idea of motion is in dialectical materialism!”¹²⁵

Our Economy is even more critical of Marxism and of capitalism, which al-Sadr saw more as a matter of doctrine than of scientific laws. For him, the differences among the three economic models – Marxism, capitalism, and Islam – rested fundamentally on the nature of the economic problem proposed by each. For capitalism, the problem was scarcity of resources; for Marxism, the form of production and distribution; for Islam, the problem was the wants of man.¹²⁶ In other words, in the economic sphere the Islamic model would closely relate incomes to effort and need. It would also, along similar reasoning, prohibit any gain from usury or hoarding, reestablish money as a means of exchange, transform banks from capitalist institutions into tools for enriching the community, narrow differences in standards of living, etc.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Chibli Mallat, “Religious Militancy in Contemporary Iraq: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr and the Sunni-Sha Paradigm,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1988): 706.

¹²⁵ Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr, *Our Philosophy*. Shams C. Inati (trans.) Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. <http://www.al-islam.org/philosophy/>.

¹²⁶ Rodney Wilson, “The Contribution of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr to Contemporary Islamic Economic Thought,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 9:1 (1998): 50.

¹²⁷ Hanna Batatu, “Iraq’s Underground Shi’a Movements: Characteristics, Causes and Prospects,” *Middle East Journal*, Vo. 35, No. 4 (1981): 580.

The Islamic economy as conceptualized by al-Sadr was composed of three basic components: the principle of multi-faceted ownership; the principle of economic freedom within a defined limit; and the principle of social justice.¹²⁸ By embracing multi-faceted ownership, Islamic economy distinguished itself from capitalist society, with its emphasis on private ownership, and socialist society, with its emphasis on common ownership. Moreover, the Islamic economy again walked a line between the morally bankrupt systems of capitalism and socialism when al-Sadr suggested “individuals...practice their freedom within the limit of values and ideals which will train and burnish that freedom and make it into a better tool for the whole of mankind.”¹²⁹ Using this line of argumentation, al-Sadr imagined an alternative economic, and, by extension, political and moral, system that would serve as a foundational principle for an egalitarian Islamic society in Iraq and beyond. What emerges from all of al-Sadr’s writings is an image of a balanced, socially just, egalitarian, and equitable society, based on the social victories of the earliest community of Muslims and opposed to the economic principles of capitalism and socialism, both of which existed in one form or another in a Middle East caught between two Cold War superpowers. Yet al-Sadr’s work was not simply a reaction to international economic and political trajectories; much of it was composed in reaction to what al-Sadr regarded as an un-Islamic and unequal political situation in Iraq. Communism and Marxism, depicted as atheistic and materialistic, were significant rivals to al-Sadr’s Islamic system, but so too were successive military regimes and despotic governments whose source of power was neither popular support nor egalitarian freedoms, but networks of co-opted clients and the armed forces. The Ba‘th regime,

¹²⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, eds., *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi‘ism in History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 117.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

which proved particularly violent toward religious institutions and ordinary Shi'is, emerged as a truly dangerous enemy, not only to the philosophical notions posed by al-Sadr but also to the physical wellbeing of Iraq's Shi'i population.

In another work, *The Revealer, the Messenger, and the Message*, al-Sadr argues against "materialistic philosophy," but also, through his commentary on religious concepts of life, truth, knowledge, and degrees of being, seems to argue for the preeminence of Islamic laws (which appear sympathetic to natural laws) and for the need for revolutionary change. Consider al-Sadr's discussion of motion of matter and process of growth: "We conclude from all this that the motion of matter without provision from and direction by an external source could not cause real growth or evolution to a higher and more specialized stage...the role of matter in this process of growth is no more than that of suitability, readiness and potentiality."¹³⁰ The external source here is God, and by giving to Him ultimate power and the ability to create, grow, and transcend, al-Sadr in the process frees humanity from the dominion of man. Man owes homage only to God; he is free and thus no class, no group, no government has dominion over him. The implications here for Iraqi politics post-revolution are staggering; governments that have forsaken God in favor of secularism and Marxism are illegitimate.

In his discussion of prophethood and the role Muhammad played among the community in Mecca, al-Sadr distinguished between the revelatory powers of Muhammad and the mundane societal evolution carried out by ordinary people. Under Muhammad, a society of tribes transformed into a universal society, a society of idols

¹³⁰ Muhammad Baqir Sadr, *The Revealer, the Messenger, and the Message*, trans. Mahmud Ayoub (World Organization of Islamic Studies) n.p., n.d. <http://www.al-islam.org/revealer/>

embraced monotheism. “The empty society became full, even becoming a society of leadership bearing a culture which has illuminated the entire world.”¹³¹

Conversely, al-Sadr described a revolutionary system removed from divine intervention, one reliant on a “preceding current of intellectual and spiritual growth wherein a form of able leadership is allowed to mature and assume its role.”¹³² It is possible that the system described by al-Sadr is one in which religious authorities did not invent a new political and social system (like Muhammad) but channeled and helped define an already present intellectual current in opposition to the status quo.

The importance of these works, along with others penned by al-Sadr, to the nascent religious movement of *al-Da‘wa*, that gradually became politicized and then violently revolutionary, should not be understated. His interpretations of revelation and prophethood in Islam find contemporary political meanings and many of his religious concepts transform into “vehicles to social action.”¹³³ Although his works rely on a large number of Shi‘i sources (many more than an average Sunni theologian), they are remarkably universalist,¹³⁴ which may help explain why both Shi‘is and Sunnis became members of *al-Da‘wa*.

In many ways, al-Sadr was *al-Da‘wa* personified. Born into a prestigious family of clerics claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad and a student to Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim (d. 1970), the then leading *marja‘* in Najaf, al-Sadr was a pure product of the *hawza*.¹³⁵ But he, like many reform-minded junior clerics in southern Iraq, felt that only a

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Nasr, Dabashi, and Nasr, eds., *Expectation of the Millennium*, 409.

¹³⁴ Mallat, “Religious Militancy,” 708

¹³⁵ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 84.

movement of radical and revolutionary change could halt the march of secularism and Marxism in Iraq.

The religious career of al-Sadr along with the political movement of *al-Da'wa* would find a much greater enemy than secularism and Marxism in Iraq only a few years later when, in 1968, the Ba'th party took control of the government. Fiercely secular and pan-Arab, the Ba'th party, especially after the ascension of Saddam Husayn to the office of president in 1979, would attack Islamic militancy in general and *al-Da'wa* in particular as enemies of the state. In this new era of assassinations, secret police, and the pervasive threat of torture, *al-Da'wa* took on a more overt political tone even as it was forced to retreat from sanctioned politics.

Shi'i Political Organization and Opposition In Iraq

Although the conflict between Shi'is and the Ba'th party between 1968 and 1980 was unprecedented in its high levels of violence and output of propaganda, the struggle between Shi'is and the ruling Sunni elite in Iraq dates back to the monarchy installed by the British in 1921 and is in no way exclusive to the period defined by Ba'thist rule. In many ways, the disagreement between the two parties, which has been fought out in street demonstrations, armed conflict, print media, and peaceful protest for much of the twentieth century, is simply a disagreement about who exactly is an Iraqi. On one hand, Shi'is tended to champion a specifically Iraqi nationalism (sometimes called Iraqism) that stressed the tribal and Islamic values of Iraqi society. In a country composed overwhelmingly of Shi'i Muslims, such a perspective is understandable; not only does it embrace values that are peculiarly Iraqi but it underscores the political injustice of a

governmental system in which most institutions of power are controlled by the numerically inferior Sunnis. On the other hand, most of the ruling Sunnis in the relatively short history of modern Iraq have stressed *Arab* nationalism, the belief that Arabic language and Arab history and culture were the main signifiers of Iraqi national identity,¹³⁶ at the expense of Iraqi nationalism, and the dream of creating a super Arab state that extends far beyond the territorial boundaries of Iraq. Although the conflict between Shi'is and Sunnis in Iraq is much more nuanced than the dichotomy presented above, there is no doubt that this fundamental ideological difference – Iraqism versus Arab nationalism – informed much of the antagonism between Sunni political rulers and Shi'i oppositionists in twentieth century Iraq. It has even been argued that this dichotomy, this inability of Iraqis to construct a viable model of political community explains the country's political and social instability.¹³⁷

From the very beginning of the monarchy in Iraq, Shi'i intellectuals, religious leaders, and laypeople acted out against the Sunni ruling class and were vociferous in their disappointment in the failure of the 1920 revolt, for many Shi'is a memorable moment of unity among Iraqis of all confessions and ethnic backgrounds. Between April 1927 and March 1928, the newspaper *al-Nahda* published thirty-two articles by the literary figure 'Ali al-Sharqi that described what al-Sharqi saw as the success of Baghdad in dominating the Shi'i south and politically outmaneuvering Najaf, effectively restricting the shrine city from playing any meaningful role in national politics.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 127.

¹³⁷ Davis, *Memories of State*, 2.

¹³⁸ Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 83.

The collected musings of al-Sharqi, who wrote until his death in 1964, reflected attitudes of nationalism and feelings of disillusionment of a generation of Iraqi Shi'is who participated in the 1920 revolt but failed to see its potential of intra-Muslim unity fulfilled. Sharqi offered to his audience a vision of Iraqi nationalism alternative to that espoused by successive Sunni rulers, one that built on the tribal characteristics of Iraqi society and the historical role of Iraq's tribes as guarantors of Arabism. Only an authentic Iraqi nationalism, built on the foundation of Iraqi values and heritage, and free of foreign contents, could produce a legitimate government that served its people.¹³⁹

How exactly did the rulers of Iraq respond to Shi'i demands of political authority representative of demographic realities? Although the response had several variations throughout the twentieth century, more often than not it centered on the governmental portrayal of Iraqi Shi'is as separatists, non-Arabs, and fifth columnists. However, propaganda, violence, and deportations reached their highest levels during the second Ba'ath takeover of Iraq in 1968; where during much of monarchic rule in Iraq, political opposition and intellectual dissent had been tolerated to a degree, Ba'athists (especially after 1979 and the ascension of Saddam Husayn to the office of president) showed no such leniency. Political treatises like those written by al-Sharqi were no longer possible in Ba'athist Iraq; they had to be written by expatriates outside of the country.

One of the earliest examples of governmental attempts to marginalize the political opposition in southern Iraq was the Iraqi nationality law, first introduced in 1924. The law distinguished between Iraqis who held Ottoman citizenship before 1924 and those who carried Iranian citizenship, including many Shi'is who had claimed Iranian nationality to avoid taxation and conscription into the Ottoman army. One year earlier, in

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

1923, the government of ‘Abd al-Muhsin al-Sa‘dun had introduced an amendment to the law of immigration that permitted the deportation of foreigners engaged in antigovernment activities. The amendment was largely a result of a conflict between the government and a group of Shi‘i *mujtahids* (the majority of them Iranian subjects) who protested a proposed Anglo-Iraqi treaty. Yet despite laws and amendments like those listed above, deportation was limited in scope during the monarchy. Only in the 1960s and afterward, beginning with the regime of ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif that seized power in 1963 and continued by the Ba‘thists who succeeded him in 1968, did deportations gain momentum. Both the nationality law of 1963 and the provisional constitution of 1964 severely undermined the legal status of Shi‘is in Iraq. The nationality law of 1963 referred to Iraqis who held Ottoman citizenship before 1924 as indigenous Iraqis (*asliyyun*) and stipulated that all others had to apply for Iraqi citizenship. It also awarded to the Minister of the Interior the authority to strip citizenship from any Iraqi found to be disloyal to the Iraqi republic. The 1964 constitution (specifically article 41) stated that the president of the republic must be born to Iraqi parents of Ottoman nationality who had resided in Iraq since 1900, removing from many Shi‘is even the possibility of serving in the highest office in the Iraqi republic. When the Ba‘th party ascended to power in 1968, its members used the nationality law (amended in 1972, 1977, and 1980) to deny thousands of Shi‘is Iraqi nationality, citing their Iranian origins. Ba‘thists deported Iraqis to Iran in 1963 and again in 1969-1971. As many as 300,000 Iraqis were forcibly removed from the country during the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war, although that conflict falls outside the purview of this paper.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

The rise of the Ba‘th party coincided with the decline of communism in Iraq and the growth and popularity of Islamic political ideology, which soon became one of the party’s biggest targets. Ba‘thists began to label oppositionist Shi‘is as *shu‘ubi* (anti-Arab) and their protests against government discrimination as *shu‘ubiyya*.¹⁴¹ Moreover, they portrayed Shi‘i grievances as acts that promoted *ta‘ifiyya* (sectarian divisions) in the state. Although Kurds and even Sunni Iraqis were sometimes labeled as sectarian troublemakers, it was Shi‘i opponents of the Ba‘th party who were most frequently identified as *ta‘ifis*. For the first decade of Ba‘thist rule in Iraq, the exact meaning of *ta‘ifiyya* was somewhat (perhaps intentionally) vague, but following the Iranian revolution in 1979, it took on a clear and serious meaning: those individuals and groups accused of promoting sectarian difference in Iraq were those who placed their own Shi‘i confessional identity ahead of their loyalty to Iraq and pan-Arabism; they were, in other words, traitors.¹⁴²

Paranoid of neighboring Iran and troubled by the popular appeal of Islamic ideology after the fall of communism, the Ba‘th party continued to challenge Shi‘i political opposition, authoritative religious leaders, and the activities of *al-Da‘wa*, which gradually became more militant as the Iraqi government became more totalitarian. The government strategy of Ba‘thist Iraq, which included deportations, interrogations, false imprisonments, torture, executions, and assassinations, was far worse for the Shi‘i *‘ulama* and their constituents than the secularizing strategies of the British during the monarchy or the leftist policies of General Qasim. Only weeks after coming to power, the

¹⁴¹ See Davis, *Memories of State*, 184-188. The Ba‘thist regime, especially under Husayn, resuscitated the Shu‘ubiyya controversy (originally aimed at Arabized Persians under the Abbasid Empire) to undermine the political aspirations of all Iraqi Shi‘is. By reformulating the controversy to involve all Persians across time, Husayn indicted the entire Shi‘i community, secular and religious, throughout history.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 90.

Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the supreme legislative and executive body of the Ba‘th government, began periodic purges that would be a hallmark of its rule.¹⁴³

Internal strife, combined with international brinkmanship, finally led to open confrontation between the RCC and *al-Da‘wa* and the reengagement of *‘ulama* in political affairs. As mentioned above, many *mujtahids* who had either explicitly or tacitly endorsed the activities of *al-Da‘wa* had retreated from party politics in the 1960s in order to salvage their religious careers, but the unprecedented threat of Ba‘thism in one way or another drew them back into political matters.

The first open clash between the RCC, *al-Da‘wa*, and the senior religious leaders of the shrine cities took place in spring 1969, when the Iraqi government engaged with the Shah of Iran in a game of “diplomatic one-upsmanship” over the Shatt al-Arab, a contested waterway between both countries that would figure prominently in the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. On April 15, the RCC sent a government message to the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad, notifying Iran that Iranian navy personnel were no longer allowed on Iranian vessels in the Shatt al-Arab. Four days later, on April 19, Iran announced its abrogation of the 1937 treaty that set the border on the Iranian side of the Shatt al-Arab¹⁴⁴ and that it would no longer pay Iraqi tolls or fly the Iraqi flag on the waterway. Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, Iraqi president (and ranking military man in the Ba‘th party), visited Ayatollah al-Hakim and requested he condemn the Iranian government. When he refused, ostensibly to protect the freedom of movement of Iranian pilgrims to Iraq’s holy sites, the government arrested Iranian seminarians in Najaf, ordered the

¹⁴³ Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi‘as*, 45-46.

¹⁴⁴ Boundary treaty reproduced in “Iraq: Documents on Abrogation of 1937 Treaty Concerning Shatt-al-Arab Waterway,” *International Legal Materials*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1969): 478

closure of Kufa University and confiscated its operating and endowment funds, and placed strict censorship on religious publications.¹⁴⁵

Since the creation of modern Iraq after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the relationship between Iraq and Iran was one of mutual distrust. Because many Iraqi Shi'is claimed Iranian descent and because Iran saw the shrine cities of southern Iraq as its "natural constituency," many Iraqi rulers suspected Shi'is, especially those belonging to the clerical establishment, as being a "fifth-column of Iranian irredentism."¹⁴⁶ These suspicions are directly related to the 1924 and 1963 immigration laws mentioned above and to frequent disputes over territorial boundaries between Iraq and Iran. With the advent of the Ba'ath party, however, such laws and disputes took on newly sinister dimensions; being a politically-active Shi'i in Ba'athist Iraq with vague connections to Iran was at best dangerous and at worst deadly.

Ayatollah al-Hakim intervened on behalf of the arrested seminarians, who were then "allowed" to leave Iraq, but some 20,000 other Shi'is were rounded up and summarily dropped at the Iranian border. At the beginning of June, al-Hakim led a precession from Najaf to Baghdad to protest the government's action. The government responded quickly and violently, arresting al-Hakim's son Mahdi and publicly accusing him of being an Israeli spy. Others critical of the government, including Sayyid Hasan Shirazi (d. 1980), were imprisoned, tortured, and exiled. Shaykh Abd al-Aziz al-Badri, who defended Mahdi at a major Sunni mosque, was arrested and killed in prison. His

¹⁴⁵ Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as*, 46.

¹⁴⁶ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 87.

death was considered a warning to other Sunnis willing to join forces with oppositionist Shi'is.¹⁴⁷

Later in June, a group of Shi'i scholars, including Mahdi al-Hakim, forwarded a letter to the government demanding the Iraqi government protect the civil rights of Shi'is, safeguard the holy places of Iraq, and remove restrictions on all things Islamic. The demands, which speak loudly about the priorities of the *mujtahids* and their willingness to challenge the prerogatives of the Iraqi government even in a period of mass deportations, arrests, and torture, are worth including at length; the letter demanded, among other things, that 1) "the censorship which has been imposed under the state laws on Islamic publications, for the suppression of Islamic ideals, should be withdrawn at once," 2) "...permission should be given to start a daily newspaper which should uphold the Islamic view of life and expression of Islamic belief," and 3) "...there should be no confiscation of property, no false accusations of espionage, and no leveling of false charges on the basis of difference of political views."¹⁴⁸

The RCC responded to requests like those of Mahdi al-Hakim and to other acts of civil disobedience with escalating pressure during the remainder of 1969 and throughout the 1970s. The seminaries of southern Iraq, indeed the entire *hawza* was systematically assaulted, its leaders exiled, arrested, tortured, and killed. Those who escaped execution were more often than not exiled to neighboring countries: Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁴⁹

The Rubicon was crossed in July 1979, when Saddam Husayn (then President), purged the upper ranks of the Ba'ath party, executing twenty-one senior Ba'athists. Ex-

¹⁴⁷ Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as*, 46.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹⁴⁹ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 87.

president Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, who had recruited al-Hakim ten years earlier to publicly denounce Iran, died soon thereafter under mysterious conditions in his home. All the power that had previously been invested in the RCC transferred to the office of the president and the hands of Saddam Husayn. This transfer of power, in combination with the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran, empowered the leaders of *al-Da'wa* and the Islamic movement in Iraq to give up mass demonstrations and civil disobedience in favor of non-peaceful means of protest. Ayatollah al-Sadr, who succeeded Ayatollah al-Hakim after his death in 1970, wrote for *Sawt al-Da'wa*:

In the present situation, Islam needs not reform, but revolution... The schools and their curricula, the newspapers and the magazines with their aims, and the radio stations, are all tools in the hands of the authorities. The only way to change the propaganda is to change the rulers. So our *da'wa* is a revolutionary one, an uprising to save the *umma* from its present corrupt situation.¹⁵⁰

This passage speaks loudly about the condition of Iraqi politics in the late 1970s. Clearly al-Sadr, and probably many of those who looked toward him for spiritual and political guidance, felt that Ba'athism had so thoroughly infiltrated every level of governmental and non-governmental authority and every means of communication that the only way to unseat Ba'athists from power, reassert the supremacy of Islam, and save Iraq from despotism was violent revolution.

On July 31, 1979 the newly formed Islamic Liberation Movement (ILM), a coalition of the main Iraqi Islamic parties, issued a statement pledging support for al-Sadr, who had recently been placed under house arrest, and announcing they were taking up violent methods in response to government violence against them. The press release includes information on 10,000 detainees held by Ba'athist

¹⁵⁰ Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi'as*, 53-54.

security forces, 36 who had died under torture, and another 100 sentenced to death. It announces that the Ba‘thist regime is facing a “triple enemy”: the Islamic revolution, the Kurdish revolution, and the communists. The aims of the ILM, according to the press release, include: exposing the fallacy of the Ba‘thists; winning the support of other movements in and outside of Iraq; and isolating the Ba‘thist regime from its ability to “control and brainwash.”¹⁵¹

With the adoption of military tactics, many of the Islamic groups, including *al-Da‘wa*¹⁵² split into civilian wings, which continued to non-violently spread the message of Islam, and military wings, which planned and executed guerrilla attacks against government targets and security forces. Throughout the summer, fall, and winter of 1979-1980 guerrilla attacks continued against low-level and high-level targets: a *mujahid* (fighter) member of *al-Da‘wa* in August 1979 attempted to assassinate as high-profile a target as Saddam Husayn at Karama Hospital in Baghdad; and in November, during Ashura, a Shi‘i opened fire on security forces, killing four. After these episodes and others like them, the government expanded the number of its security forces and began arresting more and more Islamic activists.¹⁵³

The violent crackdown initiated by Saddam Husayn against organized Shi‘i opposition was not simply a result of internal strife between the regime and members and sympathizers of *al-Da‘wa*. The creation of the Islamic Republic in Iran in February 1979 appeared to influence many of the political actions taken by Husayn in the next few

¹⁵¹ “Documents File,” *Middle East International*, August 3, 1979, 14.

¹⁵² *Al-Da‘wa*’s military wing, *Hizb al-Da‘wa al-Islamiya al-Mujahid*, was formed near the end of 1979. After the execution of Ayatollah al-Sadr it was renamed *Shahid al-Sadr* (Martyr al-Sadr) Force.

¹⁵³ Wiley, *The Islamic Movement of Iraqi Shi‘as*, 55.

years, including his decision to wage war against Iran. Fearful that the nearby Iranian revolution might “overwhelm” Iraqi Shi‘is (already portrayed sometimes as fifth-columnists and irredentists) and agitated by protests in Shi‘i areas immediately after the revolution, Husayn moved to halt any momentum by arresting al-Sadr, the spiritual leader of Iraqi Shi‘ism. There is evidence, also, that the leadership crisis that ended in Husayn taking full control of the regime and al-Bakr placed under house arrest, was at least partially inspired by the Shi‘i controversy. Members of the RCC were split over the treatment of the Shi‘is.¹⁵⁴

In March 1980, the progress made by Islamic groups came to a dead stop. Ninety-six members of *al-Da‘wa* were reportedly executed that month and on March 31, RCC Resolution 461 retroactively made membership in *al-Da‘wa* a capital offense.¹⁵⁵ Less than two weeks later, on April 8, Ayatollah al-Sadr, the spiritual leader of the Islamic resistance in Iraq, along with his sister Bint al-Huda were executed, allegedly in a particularly gruesome way. The al-Hakim family was also targeted, with dozens of its members arrested and assassinated. Religious leadership in Najaf thus fell upon quietist Abu al-Qasem al-Kho‘i who quickly retreated from politics.¹⁵⁶ The immediate outcome of these events was an alarming escalation of violence between the Ba‘th and Islamic oppositionists, particularly members of *al-Da‘wa*. The government was systematic and brutal in its repression and destruction of the Islamic movement, destroying the ranks of *al-Da‘wa*. Consequently, and especially after the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran,

¹⁵⁴ See Ofra Bengio, “Shi‘is and Politics in Ba‘thi Iraq” in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1985): 7. According to one source, President al-Bakr refused to ratify an execution order with the names of senior officers accused, by Husayn, of maintaining secret contacts with rebel Shi‘is. When he refused, he was placed under house arrest.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Louër, *Shia Politics*, 88.

the majority of *al-Da‘wa*'s remaining members left Iraq for Iran, where the party leadership reasserted themselves.¹⁵⁷

Conclusion

The events of early 1980 clearly end the first stage of modern Islamic resistance, armed or otherwise, to government activities inimical to Islam. Islamic movements had survived the monarchy, military rule, and the short-lived zenith of communist power, in large part because during those periods in modern Iraq the governments in charge allowed some degree of political participation, civil disobedience, and oppositionist journals, newspapers, and demonstrations. The Ba‘th party, however, especially after the ascension of Saddam Husayn to president, combined ideologies unwelcome to Islamists – secularism, pan-Arabism, violence and propaganda against Iran – with tactics – constant surveillance, deportations, arrests, torture, executions, assassinations – that made opposition politics almost impossible. That *al-Da‘wa* and like-minded organizations survived above-ground until 1980 is almost miraculous considering the dire consequences of political opposition in Iraq. However, in 1980, with the spiritual leadership of the movement destroyed, increased hostility toward Islamic activists, and a law on the books outlawing public participation in *al-Da‘wa*, Islamic activists were either forced to clandestinely leave Iraq or to go underground.

¹⁵⁷ Abdul-Halim al-Ruhaimi, “The Da‘wa Islamic Party: Origins, Actors and Ideology” in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, religion and Social Movements in Iraq*, ed. Faleh Abdul-Jabar. (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 156.

Chapter Three: Iraqi Communist Opposition

The published history of modern Iraq has long been dominated by nationalist and pan-Arab narratives, by the interaction between European imperialism and Iraqi self-determination, and, most recently, by the destabilization caused by American military expeditions. Obscured by these monumental narratives are the religious, ethnic, and social groups and organizations that struggled for power beginning with the British mandate, some of which continue to seek influence in the new post-war Iraq: Islamic revivalists, Kurdish nationalists, tribal chiefs, women, and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), around which this chapter is based.

History is written by the winners, but it is also written on behalf of the winners. In the long history of modern Iraq the ICP was the perennial loser, but also represented an important party of opposition, perhaps *the* party of opposition in Iraq after the end of World War II. They were the loudest and most critical voice vis-à-vis the British presence in Iraq and briefly won large popular and governmental support¹⁵⁸ despite their incapacity to compete with the visceral and emotional appeal of pan-Arabism and Islamism. Despite brief episodes of success, members and suspected sympathizers of the ICP were routinely subjects of discrimination, imprisonment, execution, and general political paranoia. To understand the ICP is to make sense of what Orit Bashkin calls the “other Iraq”: workers’ movements, oppositional media, indeed all leftist political associations who embraced neither pan-Arabism nor Islamic revivalism but chose instead a politically viable third way. Although many of these movements and publications

¹⁵⁸ See Khadduri, *Republican Iraq*, 117. Many communists who had been imprisoned or exiled under the monarchy were released and allowed to return to party politics in Iraq. Communist influence reached its peak a year after the 1958 revolution, and the ICP came close to achieving power.

existed beneath ground, despite their illegality, and otherwise in secret during the monarchy and even during periods between 1958 and 1968, they endured and represented a significant, sometimes widespread, ideological resistance to the political status quo in Iraq. Only under Ba‘thism – which, ironically, allowed communism as an ideology to operate in a public sphere – did the ICP and the organizations, groups, and unions it represented lose their viability as independent sources of political opposition. By 1980, like the membership of al- Da‘wa, the ranks of the ICP, which had swelled in number after the 1958 revolution to such an extreme degree that in January 1959 the party refused to accept new members,¹⁵⁹ were systematically destroyed or forced underground. Ideological opposition to the state could not be tolerated under Ba‘thism as it had been, in fits and starts, during the monarchy and the early republic. Yet it was not only Party policy that prevented the ICP from functioning in Iraq under Saddam Husayn; the rhetorical minefield he had created forestalled all opposition movements. When the Iraqi state became vessel for the Party, and the Party guarantor of the Revolution, opposition to the Party could only exist within a treasonous, felonious context.

The Martyr’s Party

The ICP is sometimes called the “martyr’s party” because of the high number of communist members killed by regimes that have controlled Iraq from its modern-day inception.¹⁶⁰ The most famous and public of the many executions of high-ranking Iraqi communists occurred in February 1949 when general secretary Yusuf Salman Yusuf (Comrade Fahd) and two members of the politburo were hanged publicly in Baghdad;

¹⁵⁹ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 63.

¹⁶⁰ Ilario Salucci, *A People’s History of Iraq: The Iraqi Communist Party, Workers’ Movements, and the Left 1924-2004* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 6.

their bodies were left hanging for several hours after the execution so that other Iraqis might take notice. Husayn al-Radi, who became general secretary in 1955, was captured and tortured following the first Ba'athist coup and died in 1963.

As the abovementioned episodes indicate, the ICP throughout its existence has more often than not relied on clandestine activities. For much of the twentieth century the party operated illegally with two notable exceptions: the five year period between the 1958 revolution and the 1963 Ba'athist coup and for five years between 1973 and 1978 when Saddam Husayn undertook a campaign of repression against members of the ICP. The membership and tactics employed by the communist party in Iraq were heavily affected by these waves of repression: Iraqi communists could publish newspapers, organize workers' movements openly, and recruit new members much more freely during moments of relative freedom; each of these moments, however, were followed by phases of censorship, persecution, and imprisonment. Still, the fact that for long periods of time the ICP acted secretly as a small, disenfranchised organization is somewhat misleading; its leadership role among workers, from Mosul to Basra, was virtually unparalleled across the Arab Middle East and, despite fluctuations in membership and popular appeal, the ICP stood at the center of what has been described as the "other Iraq" or in the words of Eric Davis, "politics of the street."¹⁶¹

Although Davis in his *Memories of State* mostly catalogues the Ba'athist project of rewriting history and redefining Iraqi cultural heritage, he includes a thought-provoking analysis of the distribution of political power in interwar Iraq. Although political and military power belonged to the Hashemite monarchy and the Iraqi army, a growing community of educated middle-class Iraqis began to form the base of a politically-aware

¹⁶¹ Davis, *Memories of State*, 72.

civil society in Iraq. The 1930s especially witnessed the growth of urban centers and the political mobilization of a growing middle and working class who, despite being largely excluded from the central government, formed a source of political and intellectual power that ran parallel to the state machinery in the interwar years. The Iraqi Communist Party, formed in 1934 from three different socialist groups, became the first truly ideological and mass-based political party in Iraq.¹⁶²

No study of the ICP and its relationship with workers' movements and the status quo in Iraq could be complete without reference to Hanna Batatu's magnum opus *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* which, along with a sweeping economic history of Iraq, focuses on the ICP and how it led the national movement in the 1940s and 1950s. Batatu recapitulates the events of *al-wathba*, a mass urban movement of protest against the Portsmouth Agreement in particular and British interventionism in general during which communists "emerged unmistakably as the fundamental force."¹⁶³ Batatu also argues that the popular appeal of communist and socialist ideas in Iraq, which reached all-time highs in 1948, 1959 and the mid-1970s, illuminates the social conditions prevailing in the country. In his examination of the years between 1945 and 1950, Batatu includes several tables showing the relationship of popular disturbances to drops in wages.

The picture of the ICP painted by modern historians, including but not limited to Batatu, is one where ideas of nationalism and questions about social inequality merged in a unique way often in an illegal public sphere since, for most of its history, communists were barred from organizing legally. In the years following the termination of World War

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁶³ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 551.

II, communism became more popular and generated new cells among students, workers, civil servants and the military. Meeting in cafes, members' houses, and the streets to avoid detection, communists discussed the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy and harsh postwar economic conditions. The ICP formed student organizations and women's groups, published newspapers and organized strikes against oil companies and on behalf of railway workers. While ICP members pushed for democratic freedoms, such as freedom of expression and the right to form political parties and trade unions, and workplace rights, including fair wages and vacation days, they strongly criticized the pro-colonialist ruling elite which monopolized the political institutions and economic infrastructure of Iraq. Lack of true democratic reform and economic stagnation was often treated as the symptom of the policies of ruling elites who unacceptably denied basic human rights and allowed British army bases in Iraq.¹⁶⁴

The communist movement in Iraq, much like those in Western Europe, Russia and Latin America, can be explained not only by historical research but by theoretical models, especially those articulated by Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci whose ideas about intellectuals, hegemony, and counter-hegemony resonate with the ICP struggle against the ruling elite in Iraq. In the Gramscian vocabulary "hegemony" describes the cultural domination exercised by the ruling class, distinct from legislative, political or coercive force. Ruling intellectuals create a cultural environment which explains and perpetuates the status quo while propagating the idea that subordinate classes must inevitably submit to those in power; in other words, the masses are socialized to believe that their subservience is natural and unchangeable and therefore cannot and should not be questioned. Opposed to this idea of hegemony is Gramsci's understanding of

¹⁶⁴ Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 100-103.

“counter-hegemony,” a revolutionary ideology introduced by intellectuals of the subordinate classes meant ultimately to replace capitalist systems with democratic socialism. Like the hegemonic vision of ruling intellectuals, the counter-hegemonic vision in nonviolent; universal revolution is achieved through cultural subversion.¹⁶⁵

Ideas introduced by Gramsci are particularly provocative when applied to 1959 when the Iraqi Communist Party considered, and eventually decided against, taking power in Iraq. Gramsci argued that the politico-historical reality was that a class is dominant in two ways: it is “leading” and it is “dominant.” It leads the allied classes and dominates the opposing classes. A class must “lead” before taking power.¹⁶⁶ Certainly the ICP during and immediately after the 1958 revolution represented a “leading” class; it had widespread popular support and in many ways embodied the revolutionary spirit.

The political and social legacies of the ICP might best be described as “vanguard activism” which helped establish a model in Iraq for modern political parties. Through mobilization efforts, newspapers and clandestine party literature, Iraqi communists identified and pursued solutions to public concerns and inequalities. Even the structure of the ICP, composed mostly of semi-independent underground cells, provided a model emulated by other radical and illegal Iraqi organizations.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Simms, Rupe. “I am a Non-Denominational Christian and a Marxist Socialist: A Gramscian Analysis of the Convention People’s Party and Kwame Nkrumah’s Use of Religion.” *Sociology of Religion* Vol. 64 (2003): 465.

¹⁶⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Vol. 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 136.

¹⁶⁷ Ismael, Tareq Y. *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 318.

Membership and Recruitment

Apart from clandestine cells created among workers, high school students, college students, public servants, and the armed forces, the ICP tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to mobilize in legal venues. Political parties were created (but rarely licensed), journals and newspapers were published, and strikes organized among workers. The strike on Kirkuk's oil company was the biggest, with 5,000 strikers out of work in July 1946. Communist activist and writer 'Aziz al-Haj, whose political career is examined later in the chapter, argued the scope of the Kirkuk strike gave a large amount of power to the party.¹⁶⁸

After World War II, high-ranking members of the ICP also looked north toward the Kurdish-dominated areas of Iraq as part of a larger project to recruit minority groups. Comrade Fahd suggested that the ICP be more inclusive of minority linguistic and ethnic groups and therefore special attention was paid Kurds, Turkomans, and Armenians. It was imagined by Fahd that each ethnic group would create its own branch of the ICP, loyal to its political program, but considerate of the special needs of its own community.¹⁶⁹

Fahd insisted that Kurdish political autonomy would not be achieved through British intervention but through an Arab-Kurdish alliance that would solve the problems facing both communities and achieve political independence. There is evidence, statistical and anecdotal, that suggests Fahd's recruitment in Kurdistan was successful: according to communist activist Baha' al-Din Nuri, Kurdish was the language that allowed him to enter communist politics (he read about Soviet victories in World War II

¹⁶⁸ Bashkin, *The Other Iraq*, 100-103.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

in Kurdish publications). In the 1940s a small number of Kurds, most famously ‘Aziz al-Haj, held important posts in the party; that number increased in the 1950s.¹⁷⁰

Communism under the Ruler Regimes, 1958-1968

The 1958 revolution was almost universally applauded by the Iraqi population. For many social groups and political parties it signaled not only the end of British involvement in Iraq but also the ascension of a government that would pursue policies toward their goals. Particularly enthusiastic and optimistic about the future were members and supporters of the ICP, who were able to come out into the open for the first time after the revolution. The ICP was suddenly thrust into a position of great political power following the revolution because 1) the Free Officers who staged the takeover of government had, as of 1958, been unable to create a significant support base within the armed forces and thus the power struggle in the months that followed the revolution involved gaining *mass* support; 2) political opposition parties were outlawed before the revolution and even those parties that were allowed, however briefly, to function (like the NDP and *Istiqlal*) were never allowed to expand their popular support base and thus 3) the real source of political oppositional power remained underground with the ICP which controlled most of the mass organizations and trade unions.¹⁷¹

Therefore, and although his personal political views were more aligned to the NDP, Qasim forged an uneasy alliance with the ICP; he depended, after all, on mass

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁷¹ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 53.

support during a time when the masses were demonstrably sympathetic to the goals of communism at the expense of rival ideologies.¹⁷²

The peak of communist influence in Iraqi politics lasted approximately one year. Support for communism was most widespread in early 1959: ICP members had been elected to the majority of seats on the governing bodies of many of the leading professional associations; trade unions had been legalized; and the party had made inroads into the military. Even though Qasim never allowed ICP members or supporters to hold position of power in the government or civil service, it was widely believed (or alleged) that communists were about to take control in Iraq, if they had not already done so.¹⁷³

Despite this widespread belief in impending communist political domination, the party began to lose power shortly after the massacre at Kirkuk in July 1959 (the communists were blamed) and an attempt on Qasim's life in October 1959. After these events, Qasim began to repair relations with nationalists, many of whom were reinstated in the armed forces and civil bureaucracy, and cut ties with the communists. When, in January 1960, Qasim announced political parties would be legalized, it was a factious communist party, without organization or members, which was legalized instead of the authentic party. From that point until 1963, the ICP fought a never-ending rearguard action, clinging desperately to what power remained and fighting to regain much of what it had lost.¹⁷⁴

The ICP experienced one of its lowest points during 1963, after Qasim was deposed and summarily shot in February. An uncomfortable and short alliance between

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 70-74.

Ba‘thists and non-Ba‘thists ruled for several months and although serious disagreements emerged between and among factions, all groups agreed on the need to eliminate Qasim’s former support base. Thus a savage campaign of arrests, torture, and execution was directed mainly toward the ICP and its supporters. The campaign was harshest in the early weeks following the coup but continued unabated for much of 1963, claiming 3,000 lives. Most active in this campaign was the Ba‘thist National Guard, issued with weapons during the coup and accountable only to the leadership of the Ba‘th Party.¹⁷⁵

After the fall of the Ba‘th in November, persecution against communists diminished and many members who had fled the country returned. Relations between members of the Central Committee and the regime also improved; the ICP leadership decided in August 1964 that it should support the “progressive Nasserist elements” within the Salam ‘Arif government. For many junior members and sympathizers, however, the ‘Arif regime was indistinguishable from the Ba‘th and in any event equally responsible for the massacre of communists. By April 1965, the leadership of the ICP had adopted a position more in line with its grassroots members, although this militant line often became a subject for serious disagreement and, eventually, a significant split within the party.¹⁷⁶ In a communiqué from the communist party conference that decided in mid-April to adopt some form of decisive action, Zaki Khairi declared, “in the future, party functionaries and rank and file [members] will have a bigger say in determining the attitude of the Party and in formulating its policy.”¹⁷⁷ It also called, for the first time, for “the overthrow of the dictatorial military regime...and for a provisional government of a

¹⁷⁵ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 171.

¹⁷⁶ Farouk-Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, 104-105.

¹⁷⁷ “The Situation in Iraq and the Position of the Communist Party,” in *World Marxist Review*, vol. 8, no. 6 (1965): 80.

national coalition...for democratic freedoms, for a democratic settlement of the Kurdish question and for reinvigorating the county.”¹⁷⁸ The communiqué similarly criticized the government for its executions of leftists and communists:

Several thousand communists and democrats languish in jail. Power is concentrated in the hands of the military junta, which has deprived the patriotic forces of any legitimacy and freedoms. The present rate of the land reform laws is such that it will take twenty-five years to implement.¹⁷⁹

Several important elements of the ICP and of Iraqi politics in general are presented in this communiqué: first, it was written by Zaki Khairi, a former party liaison with the army in the 1930s,¹⁸⁰ and shows the ambivalence of the ICP toward the army, which was characterized by the leadership of the ICP as boasting revolutionary elements, but rejected as a reliable instrument of revolutionary change;¹⁸¹ it presents the communist party as keenly interested, or at least publicly aware of, the Kurdish situation in northern Iraq; and it demonstrates once again that communists and other “democrats” suffered mightily before Husayn’s rise to power. The 1960s were years of constant upheaval and violence for all Iraqi leftists, indeed for all Iraqi oppositionists.

The ICP and the Ba‘th

It is difficult to comprehend the relationship between the Iraqi Communist Party and the Ba‘thist regime without understanding the political career of ‘Aziz al-Haj who, until his public recantation in 1969, was a symbol for the extreme left of Iraqi communism. A Shi‘i Kurd, al-Haj joined the ICP in the early 1940s, became a fulltime

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq*, 25.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

militant, and quickly acquired national fame as an intellectual, publicist, and editor of the communist publication *Al-Qa'ida*. He was arrested in 1948 and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment. His statements to the investigating magistrate at the time were extremely candid and sometimes arrogant: he proudly admitted his involvement with the ICP, the only movement that cared about “the pains and aspirations of working people and the liberated intelligentsia.”¹⁸² Moreover, in statement that bitterly contrasts with his later recantation and the subsequent deaths of his former comrades at the hands of the Ba‘th, al-Haj reproached the security officials for their strong-arm methods and their use of torture. Al-Haj spent the next ten years in a maximum security prison, but emerged in 1958 following the coup that overthrew the monarchy.¹⁸³

Upon his release, al-Haj was elected to the Central Committee and five years later, in 1963, he organized resistance to the first Ba‘th regime from Prague, where he had been sent in 1959 as ICP representative to the *World Marxist Review*.¹⁸⁴ Following his return to Iraq, he became the focus of growing disaffection with the ICP leadership. By September 1969, two organizations emerged out of the ICP: al-Haj’s Central Command and the pro-Soviet Central Committee.¹⁸⁵

The Central Command quickly asserted its independence from the from the International Communist movement¹⁸⁶ and took up an increasingly hostile line vis-à-vis Iraqi politics: it called for, among other things, “the arming of the masses,” “organized

¹⁸² A.R. Kelidar, “Aziz al-Haj: A Communist Radical” in *The Integration of Modern Iraq*, ed. Abbas Kelidar (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 185.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁸⁴ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 1069-1070.

¹⁸⁵ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 230.

¹⁸⁶ See Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2005), 106. The recognition on the part of some Middle Eastern communists that the “socialist world system” (i.e. the Soviet Union and its allies) was a group of dictatorships subordinate to the Soviet Union was a major factor in the creation of communist splinter groups, not only in Iraq but also in Lebanon.

revolutionary violence,” and “popular armed struggle in the towns and countryside” with its ultimate goal the establishment of “a revolutionary popular democratic regime under the leadership of the working class.”¹⁸⁷

After the 1968 coup, the Ba‘th offered both factions spots in the new cabinet. The Central Command refused the offer and soon after an “underground war”¹⁸⁸ between followers of al-Haj and regime forces broke out in Iraq. November 1968 was particularly violent. On November 5, two communists were killed and others wounded when 950 workers staging a strike at Baghdad’s vegetable oil factory were fired upon. Two days later, three other communists died when a rally celebrating the fifty-first anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution was attacked. Members of the Central Command retaliated by forming small armed detachments and, in January 1969, ordered them to attack regime targets. Detachments raided the offices of the governor of Sulaimaniyya, exploded official vehicles, and even fired upon the house of Saddam Husayn.¹⁸⁹

The escalation of violence culminated in the capture of al-Haj along with other members of the politburo and unknown numbers of rank-and-file members, all of whom were subjected to the violence of Nadhim Kzar’s security forces. Two members of the five-man politburo held out and died under torture; the remaining three, including al-Haj, broke down under torture and were made to recant their affiliation with communism and admit their crimes against the “revolution” on television.¹⁹⁰ In his public statement, he compared himself to “a bull charging a concrete wall to break it, but could not make an impression on it.” It was reported that he told the authorities following his arrest, “I can

¹⁸⁷ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 1070.

¹⁸⁸ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 230.

¹⁸⁹ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 1099-1100.

¹⁹⁰ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 230-231.

no longer bear torture, I will co-operate.”¹⁹¹ As a result of his recantation and retirement from communist organization, al-Haj was granted a diplomatic post as Iraqi representative to UNESCO in Paris.¹⁹²

While the Central Command was being hunted down, the Central Committee reached something of a truce with the Ba‘th Party. On July 10, 1970, the regime announced a series of conditions, the acceptance of which would entitle the Central Committee to join a “Progressive National Front.” These conditions included: recognition of the Ba‘th Party “as a revolutionary, unionist, socialist and democratic party; a statement of the historically progressive nature of the July 1968 “revolution”; recognition of the commanding role of the Ba‘th in the government, mass organizations, and the National Front; the restriction of political activity within the armed forces to the Ba‘th; and adherence to Arab unity.¹⁹³

In their reply, the Central Committee doubted the usefulness of the method of setting terms before actual negotiations took place. They were similarly dubious about many of the Ba‘thist prerequisites, including recognition of the commanding role of the Ba‘th (something that should be left to the conscious choice of the masses) and the impermissibility of special loyalties in the army.¹⁹⁴

Over the next twelve months, relations between the ICP and the regime worsened. In the winter of 1970-1971, regime forces conducted widespread arrests of party members in the southern provinces. In January it was discovered that Kadhim al-Jasim, a prominent member of the mid-Euphrates Branch Committee, and Aziz Hamid, a

¹⁹¹ Kelidar, “Aziz al-Haj: A Communist Radical,” 186.

¹⁹² Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Arab Left* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1976), 101.

¹⁹³ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 232.

¹⁹⁴ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 1103.

professional party worker, had died under torture in a Baghdad prison. In September came news that Central Committee member Shaykh ‘Ali al-Barzanchi died in the torture chamber of the Nihayah Palace.¹⁹⁵

In April 1972, however, the regime announced a fifteen-year Iraqi-Soviet friendship treaty. The announcement was hailed by Central Committee members as the realization of “one of the great aims” of the revolution and by the end of the month two Central Committee members entered government, for the first time. In July 1973, the National Action Charter was signed by President al-Bakr and ‘Aziz Muhammad in his capacity as first secretary of the ICP Central Committee. All conditions established by the Ba‘th in its July 1970 invitation were accepted by the ICP, which subsequently became a member of the Progressive National Front government that took instructions from the all-Ba‘thist RCC.¹⁹⁶

In an internal memo in late July 1973, the Central Committee laid out the reasons for its participation in the Front:

Our Party based its evaluation...on the fact that the proposed draft Charter was anti-imperialist, and underlined the importance of perseverance in bolstering cooperative relations with socialist states. Also, it declared total and unequivocal alignment with the camp of peoples fighting against imperialism...In addition, the draft Charter included a number of significant conclusions, which stressed the importance of joint action and alliance between the various groups of the revolutionary movement.¹⁹⁷

In other words, the communists would support (and validate) the regime if it committed itself to an anti-imperialist and progressive agenda. But why, after five years of resisting a formal alliance with the regime, did the leadership of the ICP plunge itself so completely into the Front which, in hindsight and probably at the moment, signaled

¹⁹⁵ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 1105.

¹⁹⁶ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 232.

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq*, 171.

political suicide? ‘Aziz Muhammad and other ranking members of the Central Committee were, after all, not very different from al-Haj, who had, only a few years earlier, taken up an uncompromising approach to the regime. Muhammad had also spent a decade (1948-1958) in prison and had seen some of his closest colleagues murdered by Ba‘thist militia forces in 1963. Perhaps the Charter (or the idea of the Charter) was too important for senior communists to ignore, despite their reservations about Ba‘thist intentions; or, perhaps, a “seemingly inexorable political logic”¹⁹⁸ had set in the minds of the Central Committee leadership, one where the inevitable political and physical destruction of communism in Iraq became a reality.

After the signing of the National Action Charter and the official licensing of the ICP, Iraqi Communists began to conduct their business in the open. Communist leaders attended official function as representatives of their party and not solely in a personal capacity. Conversely, non-communist dignitaries attended special ICP events.¹⁹⁹

For a short time after the creation of the National Front, the party affiliations of the communists were tolerated. In fact, a strange kind of political hybridity existed within the Front. In a speech given at a meeting of the Iraqi General Federation of Trade unions on February 25, 1976, Husayn said:

It is our opinion that all Iraqis, even those belonging to other political parties, should not feel that there is a contradiction in their belonging to other political parties and at the same time regarding the ABSP as their own party. This is because the ABSP is leading society and the Revolution and because it has proved to them that it is qualified to be their own party through its realization of the future in stages on the basis of the reality of the present.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 234.

¹⁹⁹ See Khadduri, *Socialist Iraq*, 90. On March 31, 1976, Saddam Husayn (then Vice President of the RCC) and other prominent Ba‘thists attended the 42nd anniversary of the founding of the ICP.

²⁰⁰ Peter Mansfield, “Saddam Husain’s Political Thinking: The Comparison with Nasser” in *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, ed. Tim Niblock. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982. Page 68.

The primacy of Ba‘thism is clearly demonstrated in this passage and, with the benefit of hindsight, so too is the political frailty of Iraqi communists. The idea of dual loyalty under Ba‘thism is something of an impossibility: the Ba‘th Party is the leader of the “Revolution” and the “realization of the future”; all other parties are relics of an ancient past.

With the establishment of the Front and the support of the Central Committee, the regime launched its 1974 war against the Kurds. Kurdish defeat in 1975 allowed the regime to renew its hostilities toward the ICP. Accusations against individual communists began late in 1976. The charge was political activism inside the armed forces, a clear breach of the conditions of the Charter. Arrests and executions followed²⁰¹ and by 1979 what was left of the ICP Central Committee was in prison or in exile.²⁰²

In 1976, Husayn delivered a speech to a large meeting of the National Front, in which he admonished communists for their lack of loyalty toward the Front.

According to our information some brothers, especially from the Communist Party, still feel embarrassed when asked: “Are you with the regime or not? Are you with the Revolution or not?” The Revolution is cherished by every honest patriot and its major achievements are obvious to all... Supposing we Ba‘thists reversed the case and started attacking the Communists in our speeches and through our media...²⁰³

In reality such attacks were not far off. Yet even before the regime went on an offensive against Iraqi communists, and demonstrated by this speech, Husayn used rhetorical devices to distinguish loyal children of the “Revolution” and

²⁰¹ See Fred Halliday, “Iraqi Communist: ‘The Central Aim Must be to End the Dictatorship’” in *MERIP Reports*, No. 97 (1981): 20-21. In an interview given in Europe before the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran, Secretary General of the ICP Aziz Muhammad (living in exile) said 31 ICP members were killed in 1978 and up to 50,000 imprisoned.

²⁰² Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 233-234.

²⁰³ Saddam Hussein, *One Common Trench? Or Two Opposite Ones?* (Baghdad: ABSP pamphlet, 1977), 18-21.

“honest patriot[s]” with communists whose psychology was unprepared or unwilling to accept an equal partnership with a regime that represented the Revolution and spoke for the people. Speeches such as the one quoted above also served to exacerbate and reify fears and doubts about the Front and the loyalty of its communist members. In many ways, this speech justified a preemptive strike against the communists, whose disloyalty threatened the entire revolutionary experiment.

When asked about the breakdown of the National Front, ICP Secretary General Aziz Muhammad insisted it resulted from the fact that the Ba‘th engaged in a “wholesale retreat” from their agreed upon positions, including everything from internal socio-economic issues to Arab, and international, issues. The main factors, Muhammad argued, were the Ba‘thist renunciation of the alliance with the ICP, and renewed oppression in Kurdistan. When asked about the actual termination date of the Front, Muhammad chose May 4, 1979 after which communist party offices were closed: “The party is now more underground than at any previous moment in its history.”²⁰⁴

Conclusion

The ICP by 1980 was not the party of vanguard activism described by Ismael; it could be argued the communists in Iraq never truly recovered from the 1963 Ba‘thist purge.²⁰⁵ Its historical role, however, should not be underestimated by students of modern Iraq. For much of the twentieth century the ICP was the only voice which spoke on

²⁰⁴ Halliday, “Iraqi Communist,” 20-21.

²⁰⁵ See Maxime Rodinson, *Marxism and the Muslim World* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), 199-200. After a massacre of communists by the Ba‘th militia in February 1963, the ICP took on more the role of a supporting force, “confined to spreading ideological propaganda, and often found themselves brutally repressed by their erstwhile allies.”

behalf of the disenfranchised and which established, through organizational activities, strikes, protests, newspapers and mass mobilization, a counter-hegemonic vision of Iraq.

Although the ICP's admission to the National Front and its subsequent physical destruction by the Ba'ath regime signaled the last gasp of Iraqi communism on a national stage, the party suffered greatly at the hands of regimes beginning as early as the 1930s. Embracing a rival political ideology – Iraqi nationalism – and public in its anti-regime demonstrations, publications, and attitudes, the ICP was a target for regime forces, whether Hashemite, republican, or Ba'athist. The number of executions of leftists and communists in a single year under the 'Arif regime exceeded the total number executed during the entire monarchical period.²⁰⁶ Yet the extreme violence and rhetorical categories employed by the Ba'ath created a unique political situation in Iraq whereby opposition parties were branded not simply as anti-regime but as treacherous and treasonous, and eventually violently eliminated.

²⁰⁶ Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq*, 134.

Conclusion

For many politically-active Iraqis not swallowed up by the Ba‘th apparatus, 1980 represented the last gasp of opposition politics and civil society. Even before Iraq plunged itself into a disastrous and bloody eight-year war with its neighbor Iran, the most potent opposition groups had been all but annihilated. The spiritual leadership of *al-Da‘wa*, the organization most capable of guaranteeing Shi‘i rights, was destroyed and its members outlawed; the Iraqi Communist Party was crushed and its leadership executed, exiled, or driven underground; and the Kurds had been decisively defeated on the battlefields of northern Iraq, and their leadership splintered. Moreover, in their absence no new opposition movements or politically-active organizations could emerge. Surveillance equipment and members of the secret police towered (physically and in Iraqis’ imaginations) over a civic sphere that had been building slowly in Iraq after independence.

Saddam Husayn, whose vision of Ba‘thism was particularly violent, parochial, and paranoid, combined a legacy of institutional weakness in Iraqi society with his own brand of political logic and authoritarianism. In the process, the progress made by alternative sources of political power was retarded and eventually reversed. Influential parties of opposition were co-opted, manipulated, and decimated; the army was purged of non-Ba‘thists and reorganized to prevent future coups; the bureaucracy was staffed with Party loyalists; the religious seminaries of southern Iraq were targets of xenophobia and oppression; Shi‘is of all political affiliations were treated as fifth columnists; and the Kurds were exiled, resettled, and, in many instances, massacred.

Neither monarchical Iraq (1932-1958) nor republican Iraq (1958-1968) was especially forgiving to political opposition. Ethnic and political minorities were usually awarded only token posts on government, and more often than not opposition parties, newspapers, and journals were shut down and made illegal. Yet opposition was accepted to a degree. The same cannot be said for Ba‘thism, which gradually turned Iraq into a police state. Opposition to the regime was not tolerated, nor was loyalty to a system or party unaffiliated with Ba‘thism. The Party’s most alarming accomplishment, however, was its complete absorption of the government, then the state, and then the people. Rarely does a political party recreate an entire country in its own image, but that is precisely what Ba‘thism and Saddam Husayn did.

Above all, this paper argued that neither determinism nor individualism can completely explain the emergence of Ba‘thism as *the* hegemonic power in Iraq after 1968 or its criminal and ideological behavior after its ascent to power. Saddam Husayn emerged from a political power structure in Iraq based on patrimonialism and cooptation, and from a relatively weak and young civil society, and thus inherited a political legacy as old as the Iraqi state. Yet he was not simply a sequel to King Faisal or General Qasim. Under Husayn, the rules of the game changed in meaningful ways for parties of political opposition and for everyday Iraqis. There was certain single-mindedness, brutality, and political paranoia embodied in Husayn that made him unique, even as he wielded well-worn instruments of power.

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