COMPULSION IN RELIGION:
THE AUTHORITARIAN ROOTS OF SADDAM HUSSEIN’S ISLAM

Samuel Helfont

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE
BY THE DEPARTMENT OF NEAR EASTERN STUDIES
[Adviser: Bernard Haykel]

June 2015
Abstract

This dissertation investigates the relationship between religion and state in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. It is based on extensive research with Iraqi archives. The dissertation pays particular attention to the Ba’thist regime’s strategy of authoritarian entrenchment as a means of instrumentalizing religion to achieve its political goals. It closely follows Saddam Hussein’s strategy of co-opting, coercing, and creating a religious landscape. The Iraqi archival records reveal that Saddam’s increasing and well-documented references to Islam in the last decade of his rule resulted from the regime’s integration of Iraq’s religious leadership into its authoritarian system. Saddam’s subsequent perception of control over Islamic discourse in Iraq afforded him a hitherto unprecedented level of comfort to introduce religion into the public sphere. Furthermore, the existence of newly co-opted religious leaders provided the regime with the means to spread a particular interpretation of religion that reinforced Ba’thist rule in Iraq, and undermined its adversaries around the globe. This depiction of the Ba’thist regime’s instrumentalization of Islam implies that its perception of control, rather than an ideological shift, was at the heart of its changing policies toward religion. Accordingly, this dissertation’s investigation of the relationship between religion and politics under an authoritarian system moves beyond debates over ideology. Instead, it focuses on the authoritarian structures that are necessary for such ideologies to operate. Creating such structures in Iraq was no easy task. It involved not only the use of extreme violence, but also subtle strategies of co-optation. Saddam’s regime was particularly skillful in transforming time-honored religious institutions into political tools. Access to the regime’s internal records provided the opportunity to meticulously track that process as well as to document resistance to it by Iraqi religious actors for the first time. The dissertation finishes by arguing that a failure to understand the relationship between religion and state in Saddam’s Iraq was a major contributing factor to the insurgency that developed following the American-led invasion of the country in 2003.
Acknowledgements

For most of my life, Princeton University seemed like an imaginary place – something that one finds in books or movies, but never in real life. Now, after six years with an extraordinary group of people who seem to think that attending this university is “normal,” or even expected, I need to constantly remind myself how lucky I have been. Thankfully, my wife Tally has managed to provide both the confidence that I needed to finish my degree as well as the humility I needed to keep my feet firmly on the ground. She has been the sounding board for all my ideas and the proofreader of every text that I have produced. Often, I feel that she understands my arguments better than I do. This dissertation is as much hers as it is mine, and I will never be able to thank her adequately for her patience, perseverance, and unquestioning love throughout the process of writing it.

In addition to Tally, I owe a great debt to numerous friends, colleagues, and mentors at Princeton. My advisor, Bernard Haykel, has provided a steady stream of meticulous advice. Qasim Zaman, and Cyrus Schayegh also guided me through the process. Michael Reynolds introduced me to the sources that I used in this dissertation and encouraged me to explore them. James LaRegina was an outstanding resource for all administrative needs. Michael Cook and Mark Cohen were excellent Directors of Graduate Studies. Aaron Rock-Singer, Jacob Oldort, Simon and Maria Fuchs, Lindsay Stephenson, Zach Foster, David Weil, Eric Lob, Deniz Kilincoglu, Sivil Cakir, Kate Manbachi, Dror Weil, and Christian Sahner, Kevin Bell, Oded Zinger, Nadav Samin, and Lev Weitz were amazing colleagues and a constant source of good advice. The Department of Near Eastern Studies and the Graduate School at Princeton provided me with the freedom and resources to pursue my studies. Outside Princeton, Brandon Freedman, Alda Benjamin, Aaron Faust, Dina Khoury, and Joseph Sassoon have all helped me to dissect and make sense of the sources that I used for this project.

At the Foreign Policy Research Institute, I would like to thank the late Harvey Sicherman, Alan Luxenberg, Mike Noonan, Megan Hannan, Maia Otarashvili, Eli S. Gilman, Walter A. McDougall, Barak Mendelsohn, and David Danelo for all their feedback over the years. I would also like to thank the staff at the Conflict Records Research Center at the National Defense University for agreeing to vet and release a number of important documents that I used in this dissertation. I also need to thank the staffs at the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University, the Near East Section at the Library of Congress, the Rare Books and Special Collections Department at Princeton University, and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University. Their professionalism and commitment to making historical material available are an incredible resources for all scholars.

I would like to especially thank David and Avivit Aharony for all their assistance as well as my parents Rand and Beth. Finally, though he is too young to understand, I would like to thank my son Edden. He was born during the course of my studies at Princeton and although he is only two years old, he inspires me every day.
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Conventions

Transliteration

This dissertation uses a modified version of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies transliteration system for Arabic. It does not use diacritic marks and it employs accepted English spelling for names and terms rather than transliterated Arabic – e.g. Saddam Hussein, not Saddam Husayn. The Arabic letter ‘ayn is rendered (‘) and the hamza is rendered (’) except at the beginning of a word when it is dropped.

Dates

All dates refer to the Western calendar unless otherwise noted.
Iraqi Ba‘th Party Hierarchy and Ranks

Party Hierarchy

Regional Command (al-qiyada al-qutriyya) – Party Secretariat. Responsible for all of Iraq.

Bureau (tanzim) – Responsible for a region of Iraq. Contains several branches.

Branch (far‘) – Often aligned with a province. Contains several sections.

Section (shu‘ba) – Contains several divisions.

Division (firqa) – Contains several cells.

Cell (khaliyya) – The smallest level of organization.

Party Ranks

Secretary General (amin sir)

Branch Member (‘udu far‘)

Section Member (‘udu shu‘ba)

Division Member (‘udu firka)

Active Member (‘udu ‘amil)

Apprenticed Member (‘udu mutadarrib)

Candidate (murashih)

Advanced Supporter (nasir mutaqaddim)

Supporter (nasir)

Sympathizer (mu‘ayyid)

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1 These are in accordance with the translations used by Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba‘th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 37, 46.
Map of Iraq

Introduction: Religion and the Authoritarianism in Saddam’s Iraq

There is no compulsion in religion. So states the famous Qur’anic verse. Three interpretations of these words exist. The first, and more common, is that the verse prohibits imposing religion by force. The second, put forth by some Western scholars of Islam, is that the verse is not a divine injunction, but simply a statement of fact – that it is impossible to compel others in matters of religion. With regard to these two views, Saddam Hussein ignored the former and disproved the latter. Indeed, over the course of a quarter century as president of Iraq, he worked diligently, and to some extent successfully, to impose a Ba’thist interpretation of religion on Iraqi society.

The process by which Saddam accomplished this task had profound implications for the political, social, and intellectual history of Ba’thist Iraq as well as the American occupation that followed. In examining the Ba’thist regime’s policies toward religion, this dissertation attempts to demonstrate that the dramatic increase in state sponsored proliferation of religion in Iraq during the latter half of Saddam’s presidency had little to do with shifts in his regime’s views toward Islam. In fact, as this dissertation will demonstrate, Saddam’s interpretation of Islam remained fairly consistent throughout his rule. Iraqi archival records reveal that Saddam’s

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3 Qur’an: 2:256.
5 In addition to numerous published but previously unused Iraqi sources, this dissertation relies on extensive research using the Ba’thist Regime’s documents now housed at the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRRC) at the National Defense University in Washington DC, and the Ba’th Regional Command Collection (BRCC) housed at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. The BRCC contains over ten million pages of Ba’th Party records. The CRRC contains tens of thousands of pages of Iraqi state records. The dissertation also uses documents from the Northern Iraqi Data Set (NIDS). The NIDS includes Ba’thist regime records from northern Iraq which were taken by Kurdish forces in the 1990s.
increasing instrumentalization$^6$ of Islam should not be attributed to an ideological shift. The regime’s increased instrumentalization of religion resulted from the integration of Iraq’s religious landscape into the Ba’thist regime’s authoritarian system. This process afforded Saddam a perception of control$^7$ over Islamic discourse in Iraq and consequently a hitherto unprecedented level of confidence to introduce his ideas on religion into the public sphere. Perhaps even more importantly, the integration of Iraq’s religious landscape into the regime’s authoritarian system provided the Ba’thists the means to transmit their views on religion to the Iraqi people. By the end of Saddam’s presidency, he had developed a critical mass of Iraqi religious leaders who could speak authoritatively about Islam and who were willing to promote a version of the religion that legitimized Ba’thist rule. As a result, the regime was able to incorporate its views on religion into its public policies in a way which would have otherwise been impossible. In that sense, the increase in public manifestations of regime sponsored religion in Iraq was, at its heart, a story about the Ba’thist regime’s increasing penetration into Iraq’s religious landscape as well as the resistance to this process by formerly independent religious leaders.

Accordingly, as will be detailed below, this dissertation argues that public statements and symbols have been overemphasized as a means of understanding the Ba’thist regime’s view of religion. Instead, the dissertation focuses on the authoritarian structures that were necessary for

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$^6$ The term “instrumentalization” will be used in this dissertation to describe the process by which the regime transformed Islam into a means to achieve its broader social and political goals. This is very similar to the idea of “functionalization” in Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1998), 10.

$^7$ This dissertation relies on Joel Migdal’s definition of control. Migdal claims that “social control” can take three forms: Compliance, Participation, and Legitimation. One can find examples of each of these in the regime’s interaction with Iraqi religious leaders. Some religious leaders were simply compliant. Others actively participated in the regime’s schemes, and some were involved in legitimation. Throughout the following chapters, I will use the term control to cover all of these. While often it is evident which type of control I intend, one can assume that at minimum I mean compliant. Joel Migdal, *State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 32-3.
this important element of Ba'hist ideology to operate in Iraq. Creating such structures was no easy task. It involved not only the use of extreme violence, but also subtle strategies of co-optation, institutionalization, and bureaucratization. Focusing on these structures and the manner in which they operated sheds new light on Iraqi history and helps to address several misperceptions about Saddam’s Iraq. As will be detailed briefly at the end of this dissertation, some of these misperceptions have had significant consequences for post-2003 Iraq as well.

Moving beyond an analysis of public manifestations of ideology in studying Ba'hist history has wider implications for Middle Eastern historiography. The Iraqi archives are the only open archives of a modern Arab state. They suggest that relying on public policy and public statements – which is the standard method of studying such states – is inadequate and can even be misleading.

Exploring Religion and State under the Authoritarian Rule

Saddam was not the first dictator to instrumentalize religion. His strategies and policies toward religion should be contextualized as part of broader historical trends concerning the relationship

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8 The choice of the term “authoritarian” is not obvious here. Some would prefer to describe Saddam’s Iraq as totalitarian. Semantic debates over what constitutes a totalitarian system as opposed to an authoritarian system have taken place since World War Two. There is no agreement. For example, Friedrich and Brzezinski would never have accepted Arendt’s argument that the post-Stalinist USSR “can no longer be called totalitarian in the strict sense of the term.” See: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1966), xx; Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964). Unsurprisingly this debate has seeped into discussion of Saddam’s Iraq. Again, scholars disagree. Joseph Sassoon and Aaron Faust have both conducted similar studies, using the same sources and come away with very different conclusions. Sassoon insists that Saddam’s regime was not totalitarian and Faust insists that it was. (See: Aaron M. Faust, *The Ba'athification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein and the Ba’th Party’s System of Control* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Boston University, 2012), 26.) I do not find the debate over language – which in the end has more to do with Western political history than it does Iraq – very useful and I have taken arguments from the literature on authoritarianism and totalitarianism whenever appropriate. Similarly, as will be discussed below, some would prefer to discuss Iraq as a “post-colonial” state. Again, there is considerable disagreement over the relevance of this term. Fanar Haddad, for example, argues against its usefulness in Iraq, and instead insists that the authoritarianism and the lack of democracy in Third World states leads to similar results as it has in the West. (See: Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), 33.) I am agnostic about these debates and have thus decided to use the lowest common denominator – “authoritarian” – upon which most can agree.
between religion and authoritarianism in the 20th century. Indeed, a comparative study of similar
20th century regimes yields clear, yet somewhat contradictory trends: religion is both extremely
useful and incredibly dangerous to authoritarian leaders. Authoritarian rulers have been forced to
negotiate this duality very carefully.

Political scientists and psychologists have long established a correlation between
religiosity and obedience to authority figures. Put simply: “religious individuals tend to be
authoritarians and authoritarians tend to be religious.”9 Many 20th century authoritarian leaders
seem to have understood this dynamic instinctively. Nazis in Germany and Fascists in Italy both
actively instrumentalized religion to further entrench their regimes. In doing so, they portrayed
themselves as the defenders of traditional values against the evil innovations of “the enemy”
(whomever that happened to be). As Mussolini argued, “In the Fascist State religion is looked
upon as one of the deepest manifestations of the spirit; it is therefore not only respected, but
defended and protected.”10

It does not follow, however, that Nazis and Fascists had an amicable relationship with
traditional Christian clergy in their countries. In fact, the opposite was true. They disliked any
institutions that had the potential to remain independent of their all-powerful states. Despite this
queasiness with regard to the traditional religious establishments in their states, Nazis and
Fascists recognized the power of religion and saw it as beneficial. This held true even for more
radical Nazis who frowned upon Christianity altogether. Hannah Arendt quotes one such anti-
Christian Nazi official who nevertheless attempted to appropriate religion: “The more accurately
we recognize and observe the laws of nature and life … so much the more do we conform to the

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9 Gary K. Leak and Brandy A. Randall, “Clarification of the Link between Right-Wing Authoritarianism and
10 Quoted in: Friedrich and Brzezinski, 249.
will of the Almighty. The more insight we have into the will of the Almighty, the greater will be our successes.”

Although his theology was decidedly non-Christian, the Nazi official leaned on the persuasive power of religion. In many ways, this was an effective strategy. Some religious leaders under these regimes were prone toward obedience. In Nazi Germany, a Cardinal once informed Hitler that the Church was “aware of its sacred duty to deepen in the hearts of the faithful that respect and obedience towards the constituted authorities which was a religious virtue, and to lead all segments of the people to make sacrifices and to participate in the promotion of the common good.” Moreover, as John S. Conway argues in *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933-45*, this propensity for obedience continued even after it became clear that the Nazis wished to crush the Church and had begun to openly – and violently – attack Christian institutions. Conway asserts: “Church leaders, clinging to the desperate hope that such events were merely isolated incidents and not part of a deliberate policy, ruled that it was the Church’s duty to obey the nation’s rulers and not protest.”

This phenomenon continued well after the fall of the Nazis and Fascists. It also extended far beyond the borders of Europe. In Latin America authoritarian governments on both the left and right have instrumentalized the Catholic Church. Leftists invoked liberation theology, and right wing dictators developed close relationships with more traditional Church institutions. An eloquent description of the latter can be found in Julia Alvarez’s novel, *In the Time of Butterflies*. Alvarez dramatizes the life and death of the Mirabal sisters (d. 1960) under Rafael Trujillo’s brutal reign in the Dominican Republic. In a telling scene, the religious sister, Patricia, began to rebel against both the regime and her faith. The two were intrinsically linked and at one point she

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12 Conway, 26, 34.
stared up a wall where pictures of Jesus and Trujillo hung next to one another: “How could our loving, all-powerful Father allow us to suffer so? I looked up, challenging Him. And the two faces had merged!”

It was through the Catholic Church that the authoritarian system controlled her, and commanded obedience.

This instrumentalization of religion was not limited to the West, or even to so-called Abrahamic faiths. It has appeal across civilizations. East Asian regimes have made similar use of religion. In Vietnam, for instance, the communist regime has often highlighted similarities between “Ho Chi Minh Thought” and Confucianism. As recently as 2012, a Vietnamese official explained to The Atlantic magazine’s international columnist, Robert Kaplan, that “Nationalism builds on Confucianism.”

Thus, it is quite clear that religion can be very useful to authoritarian leaders. Yet the relationship between religion and authoritarianism is not as simple as it first appears. As Gregory Starrett’s study of Islamic education in Egypt makes clear, the instrumentalization of religion by authoritarian regimes does not always lead to the desired results. Starrett argues that elites often consider religious education – and education in general – as a good means of “social pacification.” However, in promoting religious education, authoritarian Egyptian rulers such as Hosni Mubarak introduced Islam into the political sphere and thus inadvertently empowered a religious opposition. Once it became a legitimate form of political contestation, Islamists were able to use it to undermine Mubarak’s rule.

One could take Starrett’s argument further. Not only are the results of instrumentalizing religion unpredictable, religion seems to have a unique ability to resist authoritarianism. In the

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15 Starrett, 24.
latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Arab world was dominated by authoritarian regimes. During this period, the region’s autocrats crushed almost all opposition. The only form of opposition they were unable to eliminate was Islamism. Similarly, it is no coincidence that when the Iranian Shah was finally deposed, an Islamic regime replaced him. There are, of course, many well-known parallels to this phenomenon outside the Islamic world as well. In Poland, for example, the Catholic Church was the only institution capable of challenging communist rule. Even in a regime as brutal as Nazi Germany, Hitler was never able to fully eliminate the Catholic or the Protestant Churches’ independence. As Hitler admitted when discussing his evolving view on how to deal with the Church: “Early in 1933, I took the view: dynamite. Later I realized that one can’t break the Church over one’s knee.”\textsuperscript{16} As such, in their classic work, \textit{Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy}, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski classify religion (the Church in their study) as one of the “islands of separateness” from the otherwise all-encompassing state.\textsuperscript{17} They argue that in places like Nazi Germany, “no other organization” except for the Churches (both Catholic and Protestant) were able “to resist … a totalitarian system for twelve full years.”\textsuperscript{18}

Even in authoritarian regimes with an explicitly anti-religious ideology, such as the Soviet Union, the state had difficulty eliminating religion and the religious establishment. When the Bolsheviks took power in 1919, they attempted to eradicate religion and other forms of “superstition” from Russian life. To implement this on the popular level, they even created the League of the Militant Atheists (originally named “The League of the Godless”) which had the full power of the state at its disposal.\textsuperscript{19} However even the Soviet state – with its powerful

\textsuperscript{16} Conway, 15.
\textsuperscript{17} See especially, Chapter 23, “The Churches”; Friedrich and Brzezinski, 247-263.
\textsuperscript{18} Friedrich and Brzezinski, 257.
security forces and ambitions to impose an atheist ideology – could not eliminate religion’s central place in society. A decade later, the communists began to reconsider their militant approach toward the Russian Orthodox Church. In November 1927, as Merle Fainsod shows, a Communist Party resolution acknowledged that “the church and sects were still very powerful, that they had been putting forward their own candidates in soviet and cooperative elections in the villages, and that they were even collecting funds among believers for the construction of new churches.” Later investigations showed that even Party members continued to attend church and baptize their children. In the Soviet district of Smolensk, some higher ranking Party officials were scandalized to learn that someone no less than the local secretary of the League of Militant Atheists had baptized his children and kept Christian icons in his home. By 1930, the Communist Party was forced to roll back some of its direct attacks on religion.20

The Soviets began to promote their own religious leadership, known appropriately as “red priests,” which they organized into what they termed the “Living Church.”21 Decades later, Friedrich and Brzezinski continued to argue that “opposition to the Soviet antireligious policies … existed and still persists.” Even under Stalin’s iron fist, they recount, numerous underground theological societies and church groups endured. Tellingly, although the life of an Orthodox Priest in the Soviet Union was filled with unimaginable danger and uncertainty, the number of applicants for the seminaries consistently outnumbered the positions available.22

A similar phenomenon occurred in China under an equally oppressive and atheistic regime. Although the Chinese Communist Party wished to eliminate what they termed peasant

20 Fainsod, 434-7. (Quote from pg. 434)
22 Friedrich and Brzezinski, 252.
“superstition,” Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer show that “Party leaders stressed the need to avoid needlessly alienating peasants by attacking their gods.” For example, although Mao likened “divine authority” to a “thick rope” that bound peasants to the feudal system, he was wary of confronting it directly. His early experiences had led him to believe that religion was too powerful a force to assault head-on. Instead, he hoped that social and economic advancement would cause religion to gradually disappear. Thus, he argued: “It is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them prematurely.”

As in the Soviet Union, religion did not simply disappear, and the Maoists were eventually forced to come to terms with it. By mid-century, the Chinese Communist Party began to institutionalize religion, relegating their hope of its disappearance to a long term strategy meant for the distant future. Like the Soviet “red priests,” the Chinese communists did so by developing a cadre of sympathetic religious leaders. Collectively they became known as the “religious sector” and were legitimized in place of other, less cooperative religious leaders.

Several possible explanations exist for religion’s ability to resist authoritarianism. Most prominently, religion is usually a transnational phenomenon. Religious authority does not normally stop at the borders of modern nation states. Therefore, religious authority is not always susceptible to the authoritarian tactics of a state. In addition to this transnationalism, there also appears to be a psychological explanation in which religion can counter human authority. In Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments, he showed that most people would shock an innocent counterpart to the point of death if told to do so by an authority figure (in Milgram’s case, all it took was someone in a white lab coat). Yet, as alarming as these findings are, equally interesting.

23 Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, The Religious Question in Modern China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 142.
24 Goossaert and Palmer, 152-3.
is the relatively rare case of a subject who refuses to obey. One notable example was an Old Testament scholar who refused the orders. Milgram observes that “In his discussion with the experimenter, the subject seems in no way intimidated by the experimenter’s status.” And when asked about his views on “resistance to inhumane authority,” the Old Testament scholar answered, “If one had as one’s ultimate authority God, then it trivializes human authority.” Milgram concludes that “the answer for this man lays not in the repudiation of authority but in the substitution of good – that is, divine-authority, for bad.”

Interestingly, one repeatedly finds similar cases in the history of resistance to authoritarianism outside the laboratory. For example, Clemens August Count von Galen, a Catholic bishop in Nazi Germany, would pepper his sermons with sayings such as “they can take my head but not my convictions.” Or, in his classic *Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn discusses a similar scenario in the Russian Patriarch Tikhon’s testimony at the Moscow Church Trial of 1922. The presiding judge asked the Patriarch, “You therefore consider that the Soviet government acted incorrectly?” It was not so much a question as an accusation. Solzhenitsyn bemoans that he and his fellow prisoners “never answer as simply and straightforwardly” as the Patriarch’s “Yes.” The judge, somewhat shocked by the answer, interrogated further: “Do you consider the state’s laws obligatory or not?” The Patriarch, in a tone echoed by Milgram’s Old Testament scholar, replied “Yes, I recognize them as long as they do not contradict the rules of piety.” In other words, the Patriarch answered to divine authority – not state authority. His piety allowed him to stand up to the brutality of the Soviet system.

Saddam’s regime would recognize a similar problem in Iraq. Iraqi intelligence reports bemoan

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26 Friedrich and Brzezinski, 258-9.
that some extremely pious Iraqis did not fear the regime’s coercive techniques or long prison sentences. In fact, these pious Iraqis viewed their exposure to the regime’s violence as a necessary sacrifice and accepted it as their inevitable fate.28

As these examples demonstrate, the relationship between religion and authoritarianism is dual-natured. For an authoritarian leader, religion is at once a tremendous asset and a dire threat.

Islam and the Iraqi State

This discussion of the relationship between religion and the authoritarian state is more than a theoretical exercise. Iraqi Ba‘thists were well aware of both the opportunities and threats that religion – in this case, Islam – posed for their regime. They spoke of religion being both “dangerous and great” in the same breath,29 and they readily discussed “the dual-nature of religious expression” (izdawaiyyat al-ta‘bir ‘an al-din), as in: “Indeed the dual-nature of religious expression and the sensitivity in dealing with it in Arab society, especially lately, has caused the problem of religion to be one of the most dangerous problems present in modern Arab society.”30 In other words, Saddam and his Ba‘thist followers understood the dichotomy discussed above. Although religion had certain benefits, the regime would need to proceed cautiously. Only after gaining control of religious discourse and its authoritative institutions in the country would they full-heartedly instrumentalize Islam.

They attempted to establish this control by applying a process they termed “Ba‘thification” (tab ‘ith)31 to Iraqi religious scholars and institutions. Through this process, the

31 For the regime’s strategy and plans on instituting Ba’tification, see: “A Project Plan for Working toward Coordination between the Party and the Mass Organizations in the Field of the Ba’tification of Society.” BRCC, 025-5-5 (0476-0497. No date but from 1988 or earlier. See also: Faust.
Ba‘thists dealt with independent and even hostile institutions not by destroying them, but rather by hollowing them out and then filling them with indoctrinated loyalists. They could thus integrate these once independent institutions into the authoritarian state structure and appropriate their legitimacy. Through Ba‘thification, the regime would also coerce, co-opt, and create religious leaders whom it could use both to propagate and to control religious discourse. Religious leaders who resisted this process were weeded out and eliminated. After a decade of Ba‘thification, the regime was largely – or at least perceived itself to be – successful in monitoring, manipulating, and controlling religion throughout the country. Thereafter, Saddam could more safely employ Iraq’s religious landscape to spread an interpretation of Islam that legitimized and reinforced Ba‘thist rule.

This strategy of “Ba‘thification” was clearly connected to the nature of the state that Saddam inherited and its relationship to Iraqi society. Social scientists have tended to portray states in the Arab world as weak and societies as strong.\(^32\) In other words, although Arab states have often been quite repressive and willing to employ great violence against their populations, they have not been very successful in carrying out social policies. Scholars have debated the cause of this phenomenon. Some argue that it is a legacy of colonialism, and that these “post-colonial” states have adopted the same outlook and strategies as their colonial predecessors.\(^33\) Others argue that the root of the problem is not colonialism or post-colonialism, but rather the non-representative nature of these states.\(^34\) Either way, Arab societies in the post-colonial era

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32 See: Migdal.
have resisted state encroachment, and Arab states have exerted considerable effort to penetrate their societies from the top down. “Ba‘thification” is an exemplary model of this phenomenon.

When examining similar contexts in South and South East Asia, Vali Nasr argues that religion – and particularly Islam – can play a vital role in the state’s efforts to penetrate society. In Pakistan and Malaysia, he contends, authoritarian regimes went through a process of “Islamization,” whereby they abandoned their previous ideologies and adopted Islamism. In doing so, he argues, they were able to neutralize Islamic opposition and penetrate elements of society that would have otherwise been out of reach. Importantly, Nasr portrays authoritarian leaders as appropriating Islam simply by laying claim to it. In other words, if an authoritarian leader wished to instrumentalize Islam, all he needed to do was begin employing it more readily in his policies and rhetoric.

Nasr suggests that this dynamic is also applicable outside these two countries and that a process of Islamization has taken place among the Arab regimes as well.35 As will be discussed below, some scholars have similarly portrayed the “Islamization” of Saddam’s regime. However, the recent release of official Iraqi archives has facilitated a detailed look at an authoritarian Arab state’s attempt to instrumentalize Islam for the first time. These documents reveal that Nasr’s theory is not applicable to Saddam’s Iraq. In fact, Saddam’s Iraq provides an example of exactly the opposite phenomenon. In Nasr’s telling, the state went through a process of Islamization. Conversely, in the case of Iraq, the state put Islam through a process of Ba‘thification. In other words, the Iraqi state did not adopt the ideology of Islamists; rather, it used a strategy of Ba‘thification to graft its ideology onto the religious landscape. This was not an easy or straightforward process. As this dissertation will show, Iraqi religious leaders often resisted it. In numerous cases, the limits of state power forced Ba‘thists to reconsider their tactics in

35 Nasr, 21.
implementing Ba’thification. However, they never abandoned Ba’thification as an overarching strategy. In fact, it was the eventual success of this strategy that allowed the regime to employ Ba’thized Islamic leaders and institutions to combat the Islamist opposition and entrench its rule. Thus, contrary to Nasr’s portrayal, controlling religion and molding it into an acceptable form preceded the regime’s attempt to instrumentalize it fully.

As discussed above, this dynamic stems from the dual-nature of religion’s relationship to the authoritarian state. Navigating this dual-natured relationship has often led authoritarian regimes to employ similar strategies. To appropriate religion without empowering a difficult-to-contain religious opposition, Saddam and other authoritarian rulers often attempted to control religious discourse. Thus, as discussed above, the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party eventually had to come to terms with religion, but they did not do so by adopting the traditional religious discourse of their respective countries. They grafted their own ideology onto the religious landscape. As such, the Soviets created a “Living Church” and the Chinese a “religious sector.” These institutions molded religion into something more ideologically acceptable to their regimes. Hence, an Archbishop in the Living Church once declared: “The atheists do divine work and the commune is the ideal of Christianity.”36 In Nazi Germany a similar phenomenon took place. In addition to cracking down on the traditional Catholic and Protestant Churches in Germany, the Nazis promoted the “German Christians.” This organization transformed traditional Christianity into something more acceptable to Nazis. For example, the German Christians regarded Jewish conversion to Christianity as “a grave danger.”

36 Fainsod, 430.
They explained, “Through its [Jewish conversion’s] doors alien blood is imported into the body of our nation.” Thus, in contradiction to traditional Christian teachings, they forbade it.\(^{37}\)

In each of these cases, authoritarian regimes did not simply turn to religion. They coerced, co-opted, and created a cadre of religious leaders whom they could use to undermine independent religious authorities. Authoritarian states then empowered these loyal cadres as the only elements of the religious sphere permitted to operate freely. Through these loyal religious leaders and the institutions they created, authoritarian leaders could then instrumentalize religion while reducing the chance that it would undermine their rule. Thus, authoritarian regimes’ attempts to instrumentalize religion were often accompanied by attempts to develop a cadre of loyal religious leaders to carry the message forward. In some sense, this was not only a safer strategy for authoritarian leaders to employ, but also a practical necessity. Authoritarian leaders could not be in every mosque or church, and could not give every sermon. They needed loyal followers willing to do their bidding.

Arab states have not been immune from this dynamic. When authoritarian Arab regimes wished to employ Islam, they first had to develop religious leaders whom the regimes trusted to spread the “correct” version of Islam – in other words, an Islam that would not undermine their rule. This has never been as simple as declaring a new religious or ideological outlook. For example, following the September 11th attacks in the United States, Saudi Arabia came under considerable international pressure to reform its religious education program. But to accomplish this, the Saudi regime had to do more than simply declare a new religious outlook. As the Saudi Deputy Minister of Educational Planning and Development who led the reform efforts explained: “When you close the door, the teacher can always put the book aside and talk.” In other words,

no matter what the textbook stated, or the official policy dictated, a religious teacher’s piety may lead him or her to act in a manner not conducive to the official ideology. Thus, to truly change a policy toward religion, the state needed not only to make ideological adjustments, but to have the right people implementing the policy on the ground. The Saudi Deputy Minister continued, “With thirty thousand schools and a half a million teachers, it is very hard to change the system quickly.” And as he correctly acknowledged, “that is true everywhere, not just in Saudi.”

One could argue that a process of give-and-take is inherent in the interaction between an authoritarian regime and religion. These regimes both influence religion and are influenced by it. To some extent this is correct, and this dissertation will demonstrate that Iraqi religious leaders were not always docile objects of the regime’s policy. Nevertheless, to describe the phenomenon in such neutral terms does not do justice to the asymmetrical nature of the relationship between authoritarian states and the religious landscape. Clearly, for atheistic regimes such as the Soviet Union or Maoist China, any concession to religion was an alteration of their original ideology, but these were minor when compared with the wholesale transformations that these regimes imposed upon their respective religious landscapes. The creation of a “Living Church” in the Soviet Union or the “religious sector” in communist China were not minor twists on traditional religion, they were the complete transformation of it. These institutions molded religion into something ideologically acceptable to their regimes; not the other way around.

For the Ba’thist regime, which, unlike its counterparts in Russia or China, possessed clear teachings on the positive role of religion and therefore maintained a natural propensity to instrumentalize it, the ideological sacrifice was even less. In fact, as this dissertation will demonstrate, the Iraqi Ba’thists were able to influence the religious landscape in Iraq to a vastly

greater extent than they were ever influenced by it. It would be an overstatement to insist that the Iraqi Ba’thists were not at all affected by religious sentiments in their country and the region – especially the rising tide of political Islam. However, these sentiments had only a minor influence on the substance of the Ba’thists’ interpretation of religion in Iraq. In that sense, the relationship between Saddam’s regime and Iraq’s religious landscape was even more asymmetric than others.

To fully appreciate this dynamic, one needs to understand Saddam’s strategy of coercing, co-opting, and creating loyal Ba’thist Islamic scholars and institutions. This process took time. Yet, similar to the Saudi Deputy Minister mentioned above, Saddam understood that only after these scholars and institutions were in place would his regime be free to instrumentalize religion. Thus, as this dissertation will show, one cannot simply look to the public statements of Saddam’s regime to understand its views on Islam. One also needs to understand the level of control that the regime exercised over Iraq’s religious landscape. In fact, behind closed doors, Saddam’s interpretation of Islam remained largely the same throughout his rule. His increased political instrumentalization of it was not an ideological shift.

**Historiography of Saddam’s Islam**

Saddam was first and foremost a Ba’thist. Chapter 1 will show that his thought on religion was an extension of classical Ba’thist ideas developed by the Party’s founding ideologue – Michel Aflaq. This was not a traditional interpretation of Islam and it certainly was not Islamism.\(^{39}\) Instead, Ba’thists molded Islam to fit into their nationalistic and Arab-centric worldview. As suggested above, the literature on Iraq often does not address this issue properly.

\(^{39}\) The differences between Islamism and the Ba’thist interpretation of Islam will be discussed in Chapter 1.
Saddam’s regime was notoriously closed to outside academic inquiry. Therefore, much of the secondary literature that deals with Saddam’s view of religion has focused – often in very creative ways – on the regime’s public statements and symbols. Ofra Bengio’s book, *Saddam’s Word*, relies on discourse analysis. Amatzia Baram’s monograph, *Culture, History, and Ideology in the Formation of Ba’thist Iraq*, investigates public manifestations of culture. A study by Donald Malcolm Reid relies solely on postage stamps. Jerry Long and Achim Rohde have attempted more comprehensive examinations of Saddam’s use of religion and state-society relations in Iraq. However, without access to the regime’s archives, they were forced to depend largely on sources that the regime had approved for public consumption.

The most important work that exploits publically available sources to examine religion and state in Ba’thist Iraq is Amatzia Baram’s more recent book, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003: Ba’thi Iraqi from Secularism to Faith*. It is based upon, and overwhelmingly refers to public manifestations of Ba’thist ideology. Baram’s work is praiseworthy in that it meticulously explores the role of religion in a vast assortment of Ba’thist public policies, symbols, and rhetoric. However, Baram based his study on over a decade of research conducted prior to the release of the Iraqi Ba’th Party’s archives. The material in these archives seriously

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47 Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, xv. It should be noted that while Baram says his study is bases on a decade of research conducted prior to the release of the regime’s archives, he does use Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC) files in his work. However, while the CRRC files are certainly valuable, they currently number less than fifty-thousand pages. They mostly contain information on foreign policy and international security. They have much
challenge his thesis that Saddam and his regime made what Baram terms “a high profile U-turn,” moving from a militantly secular or “atheistic” outlook toward a religious or even Islamist ideology.\footnote{Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, xiv-xv.}

In Baram’s narrative, Saddam began his presidency on the extreme anti-religious end of an ideological spectrum. Baram argues that “during the early phase of the Iran-Iraq War” Saddam was “in his most secular period, when he was very close to atheism.”\footnote{Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, 10.} Therefore, Baram states that “between 1980 and 1986,” Saddam “reviled” the fact that Iraqis were attending mosques.\footnote{“Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of the State’s High National Security Council,” *BRCC*, 003-1-1 (0409-0414), March 12, 1979; “The Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting,” *BRCC*, 003-1-1 (0371-0373), June 12, 1980. Interestingly, this is one of the only BRCC documents that Baram cites. However, in his discussion of it, he fails to mention the section encouraging mosque attendance, participation in religious festivals and the Ba’th Party’s positive view of religion.} However, the release of the Ba’th Party’s internal files demonstrates that such depictions, while correlating with the Ba’thists’ public statements, do not reflect what the regime was doing behind closed doors. In fact, in 1979-1980, Saddam ordered the Iraqi Ba’th Party to emphasize “the importance it puts on religion, men of religion, and holy places.” Furthermore, the regime stressed “the importance” of “attending mosques” as well as “understanding the importance of religious occasions and participation in them.”\footnote{Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, 31.} These were not the policies of an “atheistic” regime and Saddam certainly was not “reviled” when Iraqis followed his instructions on these matters. Yet, from this foundation, Baram then attempts to paint a neat picture of

Saddam steadily moving across an ideological spectrum from “Militant Secularism to Islamism.” 52 Thus, according to Baram, in 1986, Saddam’s regime “succumbed for the first time to Islamism when it decided to try cooperation with the powerful Egyptian and Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood.” 53 Yet the regime’s documents reveal that it had already been cooperating with foreign branches of the Muslim Brotherhood and other militant Sunni Islamists outside of Iraq since at least the early 1980s. Moreover, the regime’s internal documents make clear that while such cooperation occurred throughout Saddam’s presidency, it had nothing to do with the regime’s ideology. Behind closed doors, the regime detailed that it was willing to work with foreign groups with which it shared interests, even if Saddam detested their ideology. 54 This

52 Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism”
53 Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, 8.
54 See for example, “Transcripts of Meetings between Saddam Hussein and Senior Military Commanders Discussing Nominations to Ba’ath Party Leadership and Iran-Iraq War Battles,” CRRC, SH-SHTP-D-000-864, September, 1982; “Statement,” BRCC, 2664_0001 (0418-20), August 23, 1984; “Activities of Hostile Movements,” BRCC 027-3-5 (0173-0174), January 21, 1986; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 175-76; And, Hassan Abbas, “Pakistan” in Assaf Moghadam ed., Militancy and Political Violence in Shiism (New York: Routledge, 2012) 166. It should be noted that Baram presents Saddam’s suggestion to work with the Egyptian and Sudanese Brotherhood in 1986 as one of his most important pieces of evidence for his narrative. He opens his 2011 article with a description of the meeting and devotes a full fifteen pages to it in his 2014 book. However, Baram’s treatment of the meeting also highlights his difficulty in allowing new evidence to effect his views. His argument that the meeting was a major ideological turning point is based on his reading of a recording and transcript of a closed-door discussion between Saddam and other senior regime officials found in: CRRC, SH-SHTP-A-001-167. In Baram’s analysis of the conversation that he published in 2011, he suggests that Aflaq may have been “intentionally not invited” to the meeting. In doing so, Baram implies that Aflaq would not have supported such an ideological “U-turn.” However, Baram later learned that the unnamed chair of the meeting was none other than Aflaq. Furthermore, the recording and transcript make clear that Aflaq fully supported Saddam’s proposal to work with the Egyptian and Sudanese Brotherhood. Despite this revelation, Baram does not reassess his assumptions or entertain the possibility that the conversation did not mark a major ideological shift for the regime. Instead, in 2014, Baram argues – without providing evidence – that Saddam and Aflaq must have met in secret prior to the meeting so that Saddam could surreptitiously convince Aflaq to speak against his own ideological convictions in the discussion. Despite Baram’s claims, the 1986 meeting clearly does not mark a major ideological shift for the regime. In the meeting Saddam states that Islamism and Ba’thism are incompatible. Therefore, he proposes a practical working relationship that is not based on ideology. He suggests explaining to the Muslim Brotherhood that “If you stop talking about the religious state, we will stop criticizing the religious state. If you continue to talk about the religious state, we will criticize the religious state but not the Muslim Brotherhood.” Compare: Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism,” 1, with Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism,” 194-5. Also see, Samuel Helfont, “Saddam and the Islamists: The Ba’thist Regime’s Instrumentalization of Religion in Foreign Affairs” Middle East Journal, Vol 68, No. 3, Summer 2014, 357.
logic was not only applied to Islamists. At the same time that the regime crushed Iraqi communists, it worked closely with foreign communists.

The principal argument of Baram’s book is that the unexpected difficulties that Iraqi Ba’thists encountered during the Iran-Iraq War forced them to abandon their “atheistic” ideology. Yet, as mentioned above, and as Chapter 1 shows, this could not have been the case. The policies that Baram first notices during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s were actually put in place during the late 1970s and thus predated the war. As such Baram’s central hypothesis – that the damage the Iran-Iraq War inflicted upon the regime was the necessary catalyst for a complete ideological transformation – is problematic. In fact, behind closed doors, no such transformation occurred.

Nevertheless, Baram makes this assumption the basis of his narrative as he proceeds to discuss Iraq’s Faith Campaign of the 1990s. During this period, Baram suggests that Saddam personally embraced Islamism, becoming a “born again Muslim.” Again, the regime’s internal documents challenge that narrative. For example, much has been made of courses on Islam which Saddam began to require for Ba’thists. Baram and others depict them as expressions of an important ideological transformation. Yet, with the opening of regime’s archives, one can now examine the curriculums for these courses. They do not show a major ideological shift from the regime’s earlier outlook on religion. A 1997 Ba‘th Party report on the “Plan for Party Cultural Indoctrination” of Religious Practices” listed the books to be used in the program. Four of the first five sources listed were from the mid-twentieth century and were written by the Party’s Christian founder, Michel Aflaq. The remaining book was authored by Saddam and published in

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55 Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism,” 10-14; and Rohde, 60-64.
56 Throughout this work I translate the term “tathqif” as “cultural indoctrination.”
1977, when according to Baram, he was nearing his most militantly secular phase.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, the regime’s archives reveal that these courses, which from the outside seemed to suggest something new, and even possibly an embrace of Islamism, were in fact teaching the same Ba’thist ideas about religion that had existed since the Party’s founding. Moreover, while Saddam very publicly reached out to foreign Islamists and Islamic activists in the 1990s and early 2000s, behind closed doors he made his aversion to those same religious activists very clear. In a closed-door conversation about one of the regime’s key allies, Saddam told his advisors: “by God, I do not like them. I do not like those who engage in politics under the guise of religion. I don’t trust them.”\textsuperscript{58} Accordingly, the regime’s internal records significantly challenge Baram’s hypothesis about an ideological “U-turn” from “militant secularism” in the late 1970s and early 1980s to “Islamism” in the 1990s and early 2000s. In fact, Saddam neither was as militantly secular as Baram suggests, nor did he become a proponent of Islamism. There was no ideological conversion in that regard.

Baram’s work typifies the historiography of this issue which necessarily – and problematically – relies on how the Ba’thist regime portrayed itself to the outside world. Like Baram, these scholars had no way to know what occurred inside the closed authoritarian regime, or if the regime’s public face matched its private policies. Therefore, Western scholarship often assumed that because the regime was “silent” (in Bengio’s words\textsuperscript{59}) or “cautious” (in Long’s\textsuperscript{60}) on the issue of religion in the initial years of Saddam’s presidency, it must have considered religion to be unimportant. Later, as religion became more prominent in the regime’s public discourse, these scholars made the entirely reasonable assumption that the religious component

\textsuperscript{59} Bengio, \textit{Saddam’s Word}, 176.
\textsuperscript{60} Long, 56-7.
of the regime’s ideology must have changed. Thus, similar to Baram, Long claims that Saddam “found religion.”

Bengio lays out various stages: from silence; to indications of change; to toeing the Islamic line; and finally “deliberate Islamic flag-waving.” Adeed Dawisha takes a similar approach, arguing that Saddam moved from Arabism to Islam.

Dawisha’s view that Arabism can be separated from Islam in Saddam’s ideology is shared by the other scholars listed here. However, as Chapter 1 will demonstrate, Ba‘thist theories of Islam explicitly argued against the idea that such a distinction exists. Moreover, these depictions of the Ba‘thist view of Islam share Vali Nasr’s assumption that authoritarian leaders can adopt Islam as an ideology simply by speaking about it more often. Such scholarship mostly ignores the authoritarian structures in which the regime needed to root it instrumentalization of religion.

Not all scholarship on Saddam’s Iraq takes this approach toward Ba‘thist interpretations of Islam. Some scholarship, especially by Iraqis and Arabs, has recognized that classical Ba‘thism was not antithetical to religion and especially not to Islam. Fanar Haddad, Kanan Makiya, as well as some earlier works on Ba‘thism, discuss religious components of Ba‘thist ideology that existed well before Saddam’s supposed turn to Islamism. These works more adeptly address the thought of Ba‘thism’s founding intellectual, Michel Aflaq, but they have not disrupted the basic assumptions of Ba‘thist intellectual history – mainly that one can read public statements and surmise from them an ideology. They fail to root public pronouncements of the regime’s ideology in the authoritarian structures of the state. Thus, while they identify the roots

61 Long, 53.
62 Bengio, Saddam’s Word, 77.
of Ba‘thist policies in the 1990s, they cannot provide an explanation for the proliferation of state sponsored religion during that period.

Recently, several scholars have made extensive use of the newly available records in their studies of Ba‘thist Iraq. Joseph Sassoon and Aaron Faust both attempt the monumental task of conducting comprehensive analyses of several million pages of archival documents. Dina Khoury has combined archival research with extensive interviews to study the role of violence in Iraqi social history. Other scholars have edited volumes of documents.65 These works have made many notable contributions. However, when they mention the issue of religion, they only do so in the context of their broader studies.66 Contrary to previous trends in the historiography, most of these studies have expressed skepticism about Saddam turning to Islamism, or becoming more religious.67 Yet, the broad nature of these works has not allowed for a detailed analysis of the regime’s strategies concerning religion, how these strategies were implemented, or their effects on Iraqi society. This dissertation will do so for the first time.

The dissertation addresses these issues in three chronologically organized sections. Part I includes Chapters 1-5 and covers the period 1979-1989. The chapters in Part I outline Saddam’s ascendancy to the presidency and his subsequent implementation of a strategy to co-opt, coerce, and create an Iraqi religious landscape capable of supporting his political goals. Part II includes Chapters 6-7. It covers the Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991 and its aftermath. These chapters discuss how the regime’s instrumentalization of religion during the conflict stemmed from the authoritarian structures that it had put in place over previous the decade. Part II also outlines how

the aftermath of the Gulf Crisis continued to shape Iraq’s religious landscape and set the stage for the regime’s policies during the last decade of Saddam’s rule. Finally, Part III includes Chapters 8-12 and discusses Saddam’s Faith Campaign (1993-2003). These chapters anchor the regime’s policies during this period within the context of what the dissertation describes as a “religious deep state.” They discuss the contours of the religious deep state. They then outline the methods that the regime employed to maintain it as well as how the regime employed this religious deep state to instrumentalize Islam in an unprecedented manner.
Part I: The Penetration of Iraq's Religious Landscape 1979-1989
Chapter 1: Saddam Takes Control

On March 12, 1979, Saddam convened and then chaired an Extraordinary Meeting of Iraq’s High National Security Council. The meeting was “extraordinary” in more ways than one. In addition to falling outside the regular schedule of the High National Security Council meetings, it would also set a framework for dramatically transforming religion and politics in Iraq.

The meeting occurred at a crucial point in Saddam’s career. He faced a litany of crises. An Islamic revolution was brewing in neighboring Iran that threatened to engulf Iraq’s Shi’i majority and inflame Sunni Islamists. Elsewhere, rumors of a plan to neuter Saddam’s growing grip on power were ubiquitous. Saddam was not yet the president of Iraq and some factions within his ruling Ba’th Party were hoping to prevent his seemingly inevitable accession by uniting Iraq with neighboring Syria. In doing so, they hoped Syria’s president, Hafez al-Assad, could check Saddam’s endless ambition.

Saddam possessed a natural talent for sniffing out both real and imagined conspiracies. The resulting purges and executions have become well-known symbols of his regime. Saddam’s actions in 1979 were perhaps the pinnacle of this trend. He was aware that some of his counterparts in the Ba’thist regime wished to undermine him, but he had a plan to deal with them. After a decade of acting as Iraq’s behind-the-scenes strongman, he was finally going to take the reins of power and eliminate his rivals. He declared himself president three months later in July 1979.

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Saddam’s bloody rise to power has been well documented.69 There were, however, critical aspects of it that have eluded outside observers. To firmly ensconce himself in the presidency, he needed not only to eliminate rivals within the regime, but also to establish control over spheres of Iraqi society that could threaten his rule. The religious sphere was particularly dangerous in that regard. The Iraqi Ba’thists opposed the rising tide of Islamism both in Iraq and regionally and they feared it was gaining traction among Iraqi youth. Khomeini’s return to Iran a month earlier, in February 1979, threatened to inflame religious opposition in Iraq among both Sunnis and Shi’is. To head off this potential threat, Saddam needed to find a way to manage Islamic discourse in Iraq before it turned completely against his Ba’thist regime. The most straightforward means of protecting Iraqi youth from this trend was to control Iraq’s religious landscape. It was with this purpose in mind that Saddam called to order the High National Security Council in March 1979.

The goal of the meeting was clear-cut. Saddam hoped to implement an important, yet thus far unknown plan to bring Iraqi religious life under his direct control. As will be discussed below, religion had played an important role in Ba’thist ideology since the Party’s founding. The Iraqi Ba’thists had attempted to highlight this fact in earlier periods. When they briefly came to power in 1963, they repealed the Personal Status Law of 1959 because it was not in accordance with Islamic law.70 Then, when they seized power for good in the 1968, the constitution that they created included numerous references to Islam. The preamble mentioned reliance upon God and the very first article cited “the spirit of Islam” as a source of the Iraqi republic’s legitimacy. Numerous references to religion – including a reference to “Islamic law” – can be found

throughout the document. However, the religious opposition used the Ba‘thist claim to religious legitimacy to undermine the new regime. Authoritative religious scholars, who proved to be outside the regime’s control, attacked Ba‘thism as un-Islamic. After clashing with these religious leaders, the Ba‘thists made a tactical retreat on matters of religion and attempted to remove Islam from the public sphere. In the 1970 version of the Iraqi constitution, the only reference to the religion was the declaration that “Islam is the state religion.” There were no references to Islamic law and no attempts to tie the regime’s legitimacy to Islam.\(^{71}\)

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the Ba‘thists constantly clashed with religious leaders in Iraq. The resulting atrocities outraged Islamic activists throughout the Muslim world. For example, after learning that the Iraqi regime had tortured Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim and killed the renowned Sunni scholar ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Badri in 1969, the famous Pakistani Islamist Abul Ala Mawdudi decried, “Muslims of Pakistan are shocked to learn the fate of the ulama in Iraq.”\(^{72}\) The regime’s repressive policies continued throughout the 1970s. It arrested, deported, and killed thousands of Shi‘i religious activists.\(^{73}\) Sunni Islamists fared almost as badly. In 1971, most of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership was arrested, or was forced into exile.\(^{74}\) Because of these continuing clashes in the 1970s, the Iraqi Ba‘thists remained wary about promoting Islam in the public sphere. They feared that doing so would lead Iraqis to seek counsel from, and thus empower religious leaders, including Islamists, who were outside of the


\(^{72}\) “Islamic Party Leader Concerned about Iraq Ulema,” Rawalpindi, A-330, 14 July 1969, National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1967-69, Box 2218, POL 15-2 Iran to POL 33-1 Iran-Iraq.

\(^{73}\) Amatzia Baram Culture, History, and Ideology, 19. I would like to thank Brandon Friedman for this source.

\(^{74}\) “Interview with Dr. Osama Tikriti” Middle East Affairs Journal Vol. 3, No.1-2 (Winter/Spring 1997), 159.
regime’s control. This tendency to suppress religion was enhanced even further because a period of rapprochement between the Iraqi Ba‘thists and the Soviets in the 1970s meant that the regime gave more political space to the Iraqi communists.

By the late 1970s, the issue of religion and politics was a constant nuisance for the Ba‘thists and Saddam wanted to resolve it – or at least establish a strategy for doing so – before making a claim to the presidency. While the March 1979 meeting was originally designed to protect Iraqi youth from the influence of reactionary religious movements, in practice, Saddam used the occasion to take direct control of the regime’s religious policies. He decreed that he would personally manage the regime’s interactions with Iraqi religious leaders. He would henceforth “give oral directions directly to those [regime elements] concerned with coercing (zajj) men of religion...” Yet, Saddam also expressed a desire to move away from a strategy which relied solely on violence and limited the Ba‘thists’ ability to instrumentalize their views on religion. He was convinced that religion, if interpreted in accordance with his desires, was not inherently threatening to the Ba‘thist regime. If it could be controlled, it had the potential to be extremely useful. As such, he hoped to “direct [regime officials in their] attempts to persuade [men of religion]” to adopt an interpretation of Islam that was in line with Ba‘thist thought. Saddam was certain that such an interpretation would bolster rather than undermine his rule.

The March 1979 meeting would also begin a systematic infiltration of Iraqi mosques by specially designated Ba‘thists. The first recommendation of the meeting pointed to “the necessity for good party elements in the mosques and husayniyyat.” Saddam instructed his Ba‘thist

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75 One reason that some scholars of Iraq have considered Ba‘thism to be anti-religious may be because they have mistakenly looked at this period as a baseline for Ba‘thist ideology on religion instead of seeing it as the anomaly that it was.

76 “Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of the State’s High National Security Council,” BRCC, 003-1-1 (0409-0414), March 12, 1979.

77 “Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of the State’s High National Security Council,” BRCC, 003-1-1 (0410), March 12, 1979.
supporters “to get to know the men of religion and worshipers and to build contacts with them for the sake of benefiting the Party and the revolution.” Moreover – and this is very important – when meeting with religious leaders, Party members were to emphasize the official ideology of the Ba‘th Party on religious matters, especially with respect to “the importance it puts on religion, men of religion, and holy places.”78 In other words, Saddam was confident that Ba‘thism included a sound approach to religion. The difficulty the Ba‘thist faced – at least in Saddam’s estimation – was that their Party’s view of religion was widely misunderstood. According to this logic, the Ba‘thists did not need to change their ideology or their view of religion; rather, they needed to educate and indoctrinate others about what they believed. This may sound strange for a regime which had been known for its oppression of religious leaders. However, when Saddam convened the High National Security Council in March, 1979, he could draw on a rich Ba‘thist heritage that emphasized the importance of belief in God and maintained a reverence for Islam. Two years earlier, in 1977, Saddam had clarified his view on the importance of religion in a speech titled “A View on Religion and Heritage.” In what would become a definitive statement on religion in Saddam’s Iraq, he made clear, “our Party does not take a neutral stance between faith and atheism; it is always on the side of faith.”80

Such a statement was clearly rooted in Ba‘thist thought. Contrary to popular portrayals of it as a militantly secular, or even anti-religious ideology, Ba‘thism had always included a non-traditional, yet extremely positive, interpretation of Islam as an Arab religion. In that regard, the

79 The translator had this as “faith and heresy” but the word Saddam uses is “ilhad” which is better rendered as atheism. See page 5 of the original.
Iraqi Ba'thists were inspired by, and continued to support a version of Ba'thist Islam that had been articulated – ironically – by a secular Christian intellectual, Michel Aflaq (1910-89).

**Ba'thist Islam**

Originally from Syria, Aflaq was educated at the Sorbonne in Paris. In the 1940s and 1950s, he emerged as a leading intellectual of Arab nationalism. His articulation of Ba’thism combined Pan-Arab nationalism, socialism, and anti-imperialism. These concepts were embodied in the Ba’th Party’s official slogan: “Unity, Freedom, Socialism.” However, Aflaq’s writings and speeches during the Ba’th Party’s formative period also outlined the relationship between Ba’thism and Islam.

As an Arab nationalist intellectual, Aflaq was a product of his time. His thought should be contextualized as such. The divide between Arab nationalism and political Islam that has come to characterize the intellectual history of the Arab world in the 20th century, was often very blurry – especially in the early decades of the century. As Earnest Dawn suggests, Arab nationalists and Islamists share an intellectual genealogy that traces back to thinkers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), and Rashid Rida (1865-1935).\(^{81}\)

These intellectuals conceptualized Islam not only as a belief system, but also as a means for political and social modernization. In doing so, they argued that Muslims had gone astray, and that contemporary understandings of Islam did not represent the true religion of Muhammad or his companions. The earliest Muslims, they claimed, practiced an Islam that was much more

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dynamic. They insisted that modern Muslims should return to the age of their noble ancestors (the *salaf*). As such, some have referred to this reformist thought as *salafism*.

However, what constituted Islam as practiced by the *salaf* has often been contested. When al-Afghani and ‘Abduh looked back to the age of Muhammad, they saw a dynamic Islam capable of modernization. Others would interpret the age differently. Rida shared ‘Abduh’s outlook, but he also saw an Islam that was decidedly Arab. Muhammad, after all, was an Arab, the Qur’an is in Arabic, and the first Muslims were overwhelmingly Arab tribesmen. Rida’s thought would lead in two separate directions. One of his followers, Hassan al-Banna (1906-49), would form the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and thus become the father of modern Islamism.

However, Rida’s emphasis on Islam as an Arab religion led other intellectuals to stress Arabism as a central feature of true Islam. This focus on Arab identity merged with, and reinforced other intellectual movements in the region – notably by Arabs responding to Turkish nationalism, and Christians who wished to transcend religious differences – to become one of the main intellectual genealogies of Arab nationalism.

Followers of these two intellectual streams – Arab nationalism and Islamism – would clash later in the 20th century over the centrality of Arabism in Islam and the place of Islamic law in society. Both sides tended to recognize the importance of Islam and Arabism. However, in general, the Islamists pointed to Islam as a universalistic religion and wished to make Islamic law the foundation of the state’s legal system. Arab nationalists, while respecting Islam, tended

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to see it as an Arab religion, and did not want to make Islamic law the foundation of modern legal systems.

Interestingly, Christian Arab nationalists also tied Arab nationalism to Islam and particularly to early Islamic history. For example, in 1949, Qustantin Zuraiq, the Christian rector of the Syrian University in Damascus, argued that far from being universalistic, Islam was the religion of the Arabs. He too rooted his analysis in the earliest days of Islamic history. He claimed that “in the first age,” when Islam “was still in full effervescence,” the original Muslims “treated Banu Taghlib and other Arab Christians quite differently from the way they treated non-Arab Christians.” Thus Islam, properly understood, remained a religion for all Arabs – inclusive of Christians. He made this even more explicit when he asserted that “every Arab, no matter his sect or community … should attempt to study Islam and understand its reality; he should also sanctify the memory of the great Prophet to whom Islam was revealed.”

Some Christian Arab nationalists took this idea even further. Khalil Iskandar Qubrisi called for his fellow Arab Christians to convert to Islam because it was the true religion of the Arabs. He argued that modern Christianity had been high-jacked by Western imperialists to the extent that it no longer resembled the original religion of antiquity in which they believed.

Aflaq never went as far as Qubrisi, but his thought on Islam was representative of this trend among these other Christian Arab nationalists. He argued that “the Christian religion in Europe, in most of its official representation, is on the side of corruption and oppression…” And he asserted that Islam was a more appropriate religion for the Arabs. He explained that one

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88 Michel Aflaq, “Nazratuna li-l-Din,” in Fi Sabil al-Ba’th (Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a, 1963), 125. All of Aflaq’s essays cited in this article are taken from this edition of Fi Sabil al-Ba’th.
of “the [most dangerous of] European concepts that has attacked the Arab mind” was the “separation of nationalism (qawmiyya) and religion.” He averred that this may have made sense in Europe and in European history, but it was illogical for Arabs: “Indeed the Arabs are distinct from other nations in that their national awakening is akin (iqtaraba) to a religious message.” Accordingly, Aflaq insisted that Islam was more suitable for Arabs and that it perfectly expressed the Arab outlook, which did not separate nationalism from religion.89 There is even some (questionable) evidence that Aflaq converted to Islam later in life. The Iraqi archives have preserved a strange note that Aflaq’s son, Iyyad, sent to Saddam Hussein in 1995 – several years after his father Michel had died. Iyyad claimed to have found the note in his father’s Qur’an. It read: “If an accident were to occur to me, then I will die under the religion of Islam and I bear witness that there is no God but God and Muhammad is His Messenger.” It was dated 1980, and signed, “Ahmad Michel Aflaq,” suggesting that he also took an Islamic name.90 Thereafter, the Iraqi Ba’thists referred to him as Ahmad Michel Aflaq.91

Whether or not he converted, Aflaq clearly had a deep love for Islam. He articulated his ideas on Islam in three important, but often overlooked essays: “In Memory of the Arab Prophet” (Dhikra al-Rasul al-‘Arabi) from 1943; “Our View of Religion” (Nazratuna lil-Din) from 1956; and “The Issue of Religion in the Arab Ba’th” (Qadiyyat al-Din fi al-Ba’th al-‘Arabi) also from 1956. The Islam that emerged from these essays was a divine monotheism for the Arabs. It was a nationalized form of religion that was subordinate to a politicized ethnic identity, rather than a universalistic religion that transcended ethnicities. As such, Aflaq insisted: “The life of the Prophet is an example of the Arab spirit in its most perfect form.” And he declared, “Islam,

90 See: BRCC, 3156_0000 (0101-0111), March 19, 1995.
91 For example, see: “Eighth anniversary of the death of the Founding Leader, May god have mercy on him,” BRCC, 028-5-1 (0497), June 2, 1997.
therefore, was an Arab movement, and its meaning was to renew Arabism and to complete it. The language in which it came down [to Muhammad] was Arabic, its view and understanding were of the Arab mind [etc..]” In that sense, “The Muslim of [the Prophet’s] time was nothing other than the Arab.” At one climactic point he drove the point home, emphatically declaring that “Muhammad was every Arab, and every Arab today is Muhammad.”92 This assertion exemplifies the essence of Aflaq’s thought on Islam. All Arabs – even Christians – were necessarily the embodiment of Muhammad’s mission. As Sylvia Haim has pointed out, “For Aflaq, Islam is Arab nationalism, and any other kind of Islam is either degenerate or an imposition of Western imperialism.”93 Accordingly, Aflaq dismissed other, universalistic, non-Arab-centric versions of Islam as inauthentic. He denounced adherents to such a universalistic Islamic identity as “reactionaries,” who adhered to the outdated idea that religion was more important than nationalism.

Aflaq’s ideas departed significantly from traditional interpretations and practices of Islam. His Islam did not rest on the scriptural or legal base of the Islamic tradition. He argued that “we may not be seen praying with those praying, or fasting with those who fast, but we believe in God.”94 Instead Aflaq insisted that Islam needed to be revived “spiritually, not in its form or letter.”95 The “spirit” of Islam was, of course, Arab nationalism. However, while Aflaq reinterpreted Islam in accordance with his Arab nationalist sensibilities, he did not disassociate it completely from its religious content or divine nature. He referred to Muhammad’s preaching as “a heavenly message.” He described Muhammad and his followers as “the believers” (al-mu’minun) and his opponents as “the polytheists” (al-mushrikun). The Arab conquests were a

93 Sylvia Haim, 64. (Emphasis is original).
“religious duty” for the sake of God.96 Moreover, he described atheism as “evil,” explaining: “We consider atheism to be a false position in life, a deceitful, detrimental, and void position.”97

In making such arguments, Aflaq distinguished Ba’thism from its two main rivals – Marxism and Islamism. He alleged that the Marxists’ complete dismissal of religion revealed the “simplistic” and “superficial” nature of their ideology. Yet, by subordinating Islam to Arab nationalism, Aflaq also distinguished Ba’thism from Islamist “reactionaries,” who considered Islamic identity to be superior to Arab nationalism. Accordingly, Aflaq maintained that the Ba’thists needed to fight against the Islamists’ reactionary religion, “but at the same time, to know the truth of religion and the truth of the human soul.”98

As will be detailed in the following chapters, Aflaq’s ideas would form the basis of Ba’thist conceptions of religion in Saddam’s Iraq. Saddam clearly felt that if Islam was interpreted in accordance with Aflaq’s thought, it could be a powerful force in support of his regime. Consequently, Saddam’s speeches, both in public and in private, not only embodied the spirit of Aflaq’s teachings on Islam, they often quoted Aflaq directly.99 Likewise, throughout the entirety of Saddam’s presidency, his regime’s official reports on religion – both public and private – quoted Aflaq and reflect his ideas, as did official slogans used for religious festivals.100 In short, Aflaq’s Ba’thist interpretation of Islam was the official religion of Saddam’s Iraq. It remained so until the regime’s downfall in 2003.

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97 Michel Aflaq, “Nazaratuna lil-Din,” 128.
99 See, for example, “Study on Ba’th Party Principles and Iraqi and Islamic History,” CRRC, SH-BATH-D-000-474, Undated but from late 1990s; “Speech of The Leader President Saddam Hussein, May God Preserve Him, about the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, in the 11th meeting of the Parliament,” BRCC, 2982_0000 (0603), March 3rd, 1996.
However, instilling such heterodox ideas in Iraq’s religious landscape would not be an easy task. It would require years of persistently coercing, co-opting, and creating religious leaders who would adhere to Ba’thist interpretations of religion. Such a process would inevitably engender resistance by traditional religious leaders. At times this resistance would be overt, and at other times it would be subtle. In the 1979 meeting of the High National Security Council, Saddam laid the foundation for the regime’s strategy and for the inevitable conflicts that would ensue between the state and the Iraqi religious sphere.

First Step: Map the Religious Landscape

Before the Saddam could superimpose Ba’thist interpretations of Islam onto Iraq’s religious landscape, he needed first to understand who Iraq’s religious leaders were, what they believed, and most importantly, whether they could be trusted. This was true, not only for religious scholars and sermon-givers in mosques. The regime was also concerned about Iraqis who held deep religious convictions, but worked in other sectors of society. Previously, Iraqi Ba’thists had little contact with any religious activists, except when they caused problems. Thus, the first step in controlling Iraq’s religious landscape was to map it. In addition to taking direct control over religious issues at the 1979 High National Security Council meeting, Saddam ordered regime officials to conduct “an inventory of the men of religion and their previous backgrounds,” taking special note of “their family and social status.” A similar “inventory” was ordered for “those who have religious preferences in the ranks of the students in university and secondary school and likewise of the farmers and workers.”

On one hand, this allowed the regime to carry out its previous repressive policies more effectively. By mapping the religious landscape, Saddam hoped to identify those who held “extremist” views. Because he was especially concerned with the youth, he ordered regime officials to “designate and mark professors, teachers, and instructors who have a preference for religious extremism” and to “prevent” them from teaching. Then, to mitigate the threat – and to buy time until the regime could deal with them more appropriately – Saddam instructed the Ba’th Party and the security services to “spread doubts between these elements [of religious extremists] in order to create mistrust between them” and to “separate or weaken the ties between them.”

On the other hand, this plan also represented a new approach to issues of religion and politics for the regime. Instead of simply repressing problematic religious elements, Saddam hoped to identify potentially useful religious actors who could help to instill Ba’thist interpretations of Islam in Iraqi society and thereby legitimate his rule. However, because the Ba’thists had limited experience working with religious actors, they had few clear allies and thus little foundation on which to begin carrying out the plan. Saddam decided first to identify individuals who could best assist his efforts. He ordered regime officials to pay particular attention to collecting “information on political and social backgrounds.” The regime could then “select the most prominent elements, concentrate on them and their activities, and thus work on winning them over to the ranks of the Party.” In doing so, Saddam hoped to appropriate their status and thereby enable the regime to co-opt others.

The regime would bombard these select religious actors with Ba’thist propaganda on religion, attempting to convince them of the validity of its interpretations of Islam and Arabism. As Saddam recognized, and as subsequent chapters will demonstrate, transforming the religious

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landscape would not be simple or easy. To be effective, the Ba‘thists, including Saddam, needed not only to properly adhere to Party ideology, but also to present themselves as pious believers and as good Muslims. Thus, the regime created five prerequisites for Ba‘thists who would work on winning over religious activists. It stressed:

a) The importance of attending the mosques and seeking to demonstrate a proper appearance and a decent social standing.

b) Choosing an outlook from which it is possible to act within religious circles.

c) Giving the necessary financial aid [to religious leaders] … through the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs.

d) Designating a comrade to oversee the people in the schools and the villages.

e) Understanding the importance of religious occasions and participation in them.  

Saddam’s plan to win over influential religious actors in Iraq highlighted three important features of the regime’s relationship to the Iraqi religious landscape at the beginning of Saddam’s presidency. First, and most importantly, these were the policies of a regime that was on the outside looking in. In other words, it had not penetrated the religious landscape and had little control over religion in Iraq. As opposed to later regime plans that discuss how the Ba‘thists would rely upon their supporters in the religious establishment, the religious leaders discussed in the regime’s plans from 1979-1980 were clearly not tied to – and certainly not loyal to – the Ba‘thist regime. The entire purpose of this plan was to begin co-opting these religious leaders so that they would be in the future. Second, the regime’s preference was not to eliminate religion as a prominent aspect of Iraqi society. Rather, the regime wished to control religion by enforcing a Ba‘thist interpretation of Islam that would legitimate Ba‘thist rule and marginalize its opponents.

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Accordingly, Ba‘thists who worked with religious leaders were instructed “to expose them to the interpretation and outlook of the Party especially toward religion and the performance of religious rituals.”\textsuperscript{104} By highlighting what the Ba‘thists considered to be an intrinsic and necessary link between Islam and Arab nationalism, Saddam felt that the regime could win religious supporters and undermine Islamist and sectarian opposition. The Ba‘thist regime promoted participation in religious activities that it controlled and that it could ensure would adhere to its interpretation of a non-sectarian, Arab nationalist Islam. Yet, at the same time, the regime also attempted to limit the influence of religious leaders and institutions outside of its control. If Iraqis listened to such religious leaders or attended such institutions, the regime feared that they could be influenced by sectarian or Islamist interpretations of Islam that would threaten the regime by undermining the unity/stability of the country. Because the Ba‘thists did not yet control most religious leaders and institutions in the country, the regime’s public policies sometimes falsely gave the impression to outsiders that it was simply attempting to limit religious activities in the country. However, reading the regime’s public statements in light of its internal records makes clear that such impressions were mistaken. The regime only wished to limit participation in religious activities outside of its control.\textsuperscript{105} Third, while the regime was keen to use religion, the tone of the above plan is reticent. Because Iraq’s religious landscape remained mostly beyond the regime’s control, it was potentially dangerous. Saddam feared that in a violent and protracted conflict with authoritative religious actors, the Ba‘thists might appear anti-religious. Considering that most Iraqis were religious Muslims whose faith was extremely important, such a scenario could seriously damage the regime’s legitimacy.

\textsuperscript{104} “Instructions,” \textit{BRCC}, 003-1-1 (0397-0405), March 22, 1980.
\textsuperscript{105} For a prominent example of public manifestations of the regime’s policies which could be misconstrued, but become clear with access to the regime’s internal records, see: \textit{Al-Taqrir al-Markazi lil-Mu‘tamar al-Qutri al-Tasi‘}, 263-304. In the document, the regime expresses an apprehension that Iraqis are adhering to non-regime-sponsored versions of religion and that this could result in dangerous sectarian tendencies.
Saddam’s wariness about this dynamic was not new. In his landmark 1977 speech, “A View on Religion and Heritage,” cited above, he declared, “our Party … is always on the side of faith,” but he also cautioned against promoting that idea too forcefully. Saddam warned that a reactionary opposition was “using religion for political purposes.” And because Saddam was unable to control religious discourse, he wanted to “avoid clashing with them directly and in a traditional manner.” He feared that such a clash would “consolidate the stand” of this religious opposition, and “create a psychological barrier between the Party and its ideology on one hand and certain sections of the population on the other.”

In other words, it would allow Islamists to paint the regime as anti-religious and thus delegitimize it among large sections of the Iraqi population. As such, the regime needed to prevent a full blown clash with religious opposition. In such a conflict, authoritative religious actors beyond the regime’s control would be able to define the terms of the conflict and smear the Ba’thists as the enemies of Islam.

Consequently, the Ba’thists needed to balance between their desire to invoke their interpretation of Islam and the danger of doing so too forcefully. This dynamic predated Saddam’s rise to power in Iraq. Aflaq himself had recognized a similar problem earlier in the century. In his 1956 essay, “The Issue of Religion in the Arab Ba‘th,” he argued, “we are not ignorant that our view [on religion] requires effort and caution several times that of the communist view, which shrinks from the problem in that it denies it completely.” Accordingly, Aflaq understood that employing religion as part of his ideology was inherently problematic and difficult. The communists, he suggested, had a much easier task because they could simply attempt to keep religion out of the public sphere. If they were successful in doing so, their legitimacy could not be threatened by religious actors outside their control. However, as mentioned above, Aflaq rejected the communists’ atheism. This left him arguing for an Islam

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that most traditional Islamic authorities vehemently rejected. It was a dangerous position, and he recognized it as such, but he also understood the need to work toward transforming what he considered to be the widely accepted, yet reactionary discourse on religion into what he viewed as a progressive nationalist discourse. On the issue of religion, he argued, “there is a vast distance which will necessarily remain very tense between the sick and negative situation that we live in, and the other goals of our ideas.” He also recognized that when it came to religious matters, there was a need for “sufficient courage and complete vigilance in order to ascertain all the causes of corruption in the current situation, and to fight them unrelentingly.” It would be difficult to find better words to describe how Saddam perceived his task in 1979.

However, Saddam’s plan was also complicated by the fact that in the early years of their rule, the Iraqi Ba‘thists spent most of their time and resources attempting simply to stabilize their regime. They did not have the manpower or institutional resources to deal with religious issues effectively. As a result, they often had little recourse other than repressing problematic religious actors and ideas. As mentioned above, during the late 1960s and much of the 1970s, they had downplayed the importance or religion in the thought of canonical Ba‘thist theorists such as Aflaq in order to avoid ideological clashes over Islam. As a result, many rank and file Ba‘thists were unaware of, or disinterested in their Party’s teachings on religion. This lapse on the part on the nascent Ba‘thist regime made the issue of religion even more dangerous. Most Ba‘th Party members – like most Iraqis – were religious. The regime leadership feared that Ba‘thists who did not completely understand the Party’s position on religion could fall prey to the opposition’s propaganda. One of the regime’s greatest fears was that some Ba‘thists might begin to believe that the Ba‘th Party was against religion and specifically hostile to Islam. Thus, a major part

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107 Michel Aflaq, “Qadiyyat al-Din fi al-Ba‘th al-‘Arabi,” 133.
of the Saddam’s plan to control religion was to re-indoctrinate Ba‘thists on the Party’s official position toward religion. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, some outside analysts first noticed what they considered religious indoctrination – but was in reality re-indoctrination – of Ba‘thists on religious matters in the 1990s and understood it as a major shift in the Party’s ideology.109 However, such religious re-indoctrination was present from the earliest years of Saddam’s presidency and its substance would remain largely the same throughout Saddam’s rule. This re-indoctrination on the Party’s core teachings toward religion was necessary not only to protect the regime from an internal threat, but also to facilitate its efforts to spread its Ba‘thist interpretation of religion.

Re-indoctrination, however, would take time. Therefore, when the regime implemented Saddam’s plan in 1979, only specially designated Ba‘thists were permitted to work in the religious sphere. Unlike their peers who worked in other areas (e.g. with workers, or women’s organizations), Ba‘thists who operated in mosques or coordinated with religious leaders received additional background checks and had to be individually approved by the Party Secretariat in Baghdad.110

These efforts to penetrate the religious sphere and to persuade religious leaders and the youth about the “truth” of Ba‘thist interpretations of religion – and especially of Islam – continued throughout the decade. Year by year, and district by district, the regime would slowly but steadily “escalate,” as Saddam put it, the Ba‘thists’ presence in Iraq’s religious landscape.111

An Authoritarian Impulse

109 Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, 258-9
111 “Report,” BRCC, 046-3-6 (0619), September 9, 1984.
As a committed Ba‘thist, and a disciple of Aflaq, Saddam possessed an innate propensity to instrumentalize Islam. In the late 1970s, this propensity combined with local factors such as the need to fend off the rise of Islamism and the Iranian revolution, as well as Saddam’s desire to entrench his authority by assuming the presidency. The March 1979 plan that Saddam initiated during the High National Security Council was designed to address all of those factors. The plan would inaugurate a process that completely transformed the relationship between religion and state in Iraq. However it would be a mistake to interpret the 1979 plan as a blueprint that carefully laid out the regime’s policies for the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. There is no evidence that Saddam anticipated how his policies would manifest in the coming decades. He certainly did not foresee the so-called Faith Campaign, which as we will see in later chapters, defined those policies in the 1990s. Instead, the plans that Saddam put forth in 1979 should be understood as stemming from a deeply ingrained authoritarian impulse which drove all of Saddam’s policies. First and foremost, Saddam desired control. This plan was designed to achieve it. As the following chapters will show, some aspects of the plan worked better than others, but whether by design or by unintended consequence, the authoritarian impulses that undergirded the plan would completely transform Iraq’s religious landscape. This transformed landscape would provide opportunities for the Ba‘thists to engage with religion in ways they could not have foreseen in March 1979.
Chapter 2: Co-opting and Coercing Religion in Saddam’s Iraq

Saddam’s decision to take control of religious affairs in Iraq, which he revealed during the March 1979 meeting of the High National Security Council, proved felicitous. The following month, Iran would officially become an Islamic Republic and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini would steadily consolidate his power. Iran’s new leaders did not hide their intention to spread their brand of revolutionary Islamism beyond Iranian borders. Neighboring Iraq was home to the most important Shi’i shrines, and had a large Shi’i majority. It was, therefore, a logical first target. Saddam, who became president of Iraq in July 1979, felt increasing pressure from his Islamist opposition. He accused the Iranians of interfering in domestic Iraqi affairs, which he considered to be a violation of the 1975 Iran-Iraq peace treaty. This, combined with Saddam’s assumption of Iranian weakness after a year of revolutionary upheaval, led him to invade Iran in September, 1980. The assault initiated a calamitous eight year war between the two states.

The Iran-Iraq War presented a number of challenges for the Ba’thists. Khomeini and his followers in Iran pummeled the Iraqis with propaganda depicting Saddam’s regime as anti-Islamic and they openly sought to inflame Iraq’s Islamist opposition. The Iraqi Ba’thists were forced defend themselves on Islamic terms. However, they did not turn to Islamism. Instead they relied on the Ba’thist tradition of reverence for Islam and their insistence that unlike communists, Ba’thists were believers. Promoting such ideas, without putting the regime’s legitimacy into the hands of untrusted religious authorities required a delicate balance. More than rhetoric or ideology, the regime needed to develop a cadre of religious leaders, who would defend it and promote its version of Islam. That would require a process of institutionalization and
bureaucratization, which, fortuitously, would be aided by emergency measures and mobilization linked to the war.

**Institutionalization**

The plan which Saddam had put forth during the March 1979 meeting of the High National Security Council formed the foundation of Ba’thist policies toward religion. During that meeting, Saddam began a process of institutionalization, which would link Iraq’s religious actors to the state, the Ba’th Party, and the security services. Saddam ordered the formation of “Party councils among the students, teachers, instructors, and professors in the universities as well as secondary and middle schools.” He hoped to foster “cooperation between these counsels and security services.” The plan also demonstrated that “the mission of these councils” was “to follow up with elements [of society] that have religious preferences and try to win them over to the Party.”

Such a strategy was assisted by broader institutional reforms to help the regime, and Saddam in particular, to gain control over religion in Iraq. In 1979, Saddam renamed the Ministry of Endowments as the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, giving it a broader mandate. Saddam had been in direct control over religious policies in Iraq since the March 1979 meeting. In 1981, he formalized that process by reorganizing the bureaucracy so that the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs reported directly to the presidential office. All other ministries were officially controlled by the prime minister’s office. In 1982, he further consolidated his control over the ministry by appointing one of his closest and most loyal

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advisors, Abdullah Fadil, as the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs. During this period, as Ofra Bengio has observed, “Financial allocations for the ministry were boosted, and young men replaced older officials.” This new cadre was explicitly loyal to Saddam.

In 1981, the regime also implemented “The Law of Service in Charitable and Religious Institutions,” which stated that one was only permitted to work as a religious leader after passing an exam in front of the “Special Committee for Work as an Imam in the Mosques.” This law was meant to ensure the loyalty of religious leaders, but it also caused considerable frustration. As the regime was fairly new to working in the religious sphere, it did not have enough information on most of Iraq’s imams and sermon-givers. Thus, the Ba’thists had no way to ensure their loyalty. Consequently, many mosques were left without religious leaders.

In the early 1980s, Saddam also created committees for religious awareness (taw’iya diniyya) throughout Iraq. These committees were composed of religious leaders loyal to the regime and were established at the local level, with several of them in each province. They were designed to institutionalize, bureaucratize, and thus better control religion. Through them the regime could keep an eye on religious trends in all corners of the country and communicate directly with religious leaders about which practices and ideas were acceptable, and which would be punished. These committees also provided the topics which sermon-givers were required to discuss during Friday prayers. As a rule, all mosques in Iraq were required to give the same

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114 When Saddam officially took power in 1979, he purged other high-ranking Ba’thists, including some of Saddam’s closest colleagues, in what became an infamously bloody show trial followed by mass executions. To carry this out, he relied on only his closest and most loyal associates. Abdullah Fadil was named a judge in this trial, thus he must have been considered a loyal and trusted advisor. For a detailed rendition of the purge see: Coughlin, Saddam: His Rise and Fall, 155-163. For reports linking Abdullah Fadil to the trial see: “Discovery of Anti-Regime Plot in Iraq,” Iraqi News Agency, July 28, 1979. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts. For his appointment as minister see: “Reshuffle in the Iraqi Administration,” Iraqi News Agency, June 28, 1982. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts.


116 “Modification,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0171), February 17, 1985.

regime-dictated sermon on Friday, and then, if necessary, sermon-givers were permitted to discuss local issues. But these local topics, as well as any modifications to the sermon needed to be approved by the committees.\textsuperscript{118} In organizing the religious leaders into committees, the regime also created institutions which could speak more authoritatively in favor of Saddam’s rule. These complemented the regime-controlled “leagues of Islamic scholars,” which were organized at the provincial level. Thus, the Iraqi press often publicized the statements of these committees and leagues, not as the opinions of individuals, but as the Islamic scholars of Baghdad, or the religious committee of Mosul or Basra.\textsuperscript{119} Doing so afforded these statements of support considerably more weight and a greater sense of authority.

The regime encouraged Islamic scholars to join these committees as a way of co-opting them. The Ba’thists hoped these scholars could then be used to raise support for, and diminish opposition against their Party. Saddam made this policy explicit in a 1984 presidential decree that ordered regime officials to “approach the men of religion that you see as most influential among the people. Urge them respectfully to join the religious awareness committees and inform them that they can benefit from membership in them. Then activate these committees by having them meet directly with the citizens on religious occasions.”\textsuperscript{120}

The benefits Saddam mentions in this decree included not only prestige and authority, but also financial rewards. Considerable sums of money were available to those who were willing to assist the regime. As such, the regime did not always need to actively co-opt religious leaders. In some cases, religious leaders themselves sought to enter the regime’s system of control and thus reap its benefits.

\textsuperscript{118} Email correspondence with former Iraqi Major General under Saddam, May 17, 2002.
\textsuperscript{120} “Report,” \textit{BRCC}, 046-3-6 (0620), September 9, 1984.”
A 1982 letter to the regime from one such enterprising group of religious scholars in northern Iraq underscored this point. The authors of the letter began by stating that the majority of religious scholars in their area had “announced their loyalty to the political leadership since the eruption of the [Ba’thist] revolution.” And they condemned “Khomeini the devil, and his spiteful gangs.” They argued, moreover, that in periods of trouble, the religious leaders in the area had used their mosques and their pulpits to defend the Ba‘thist revolution. They had also held televised symposiums to support Iraq’s soldiers. Doing so, they argued, helped to solidify the ranks of the army. After establishing their loyalty and support for the Ba’thist regime, the authors of the letter then discussed the establishment of a regime-funded religious awareness committee in their area. However, they claimed that the head of the committee was not well-known either intellectually or socially, and thus the committee was failing. A more effective role, the authors argued, had been played by other religious scholars and sermon-givers in the mosques. They then stated that in order not to waste money, and to better serve the war effort, the funds that were allocated to the religious awareness committee should be reallocated to “the well-known men of religion” in the area (by which they meant themselves).\(^\text{121}\)

This letter highlighted a number of phenomena that typified the Ba’thists’ attempts to work in the religious sphere in the early 1980s. When the regime first endeavored to set up religious institutions and find religious leaders who were both loyal and influential, it struggled to do so. The regime had little experience in this arena. Its supporters were not typically religious leaders and did not possess traditional religious educations. Though it worked to gain information on the political loyalties of Iraq’s religious leaders, the regime still lacked much of the data necessary to reliably make such determinations. Thus, it remained wary of most of the religious landscape in the country and when it was forced to choose between prominent religious

\(^{121}\)“The scholars of religion in [withheld] and their role.” \textit{NIDS}, 833734-833736, November 1982.
leaders and those known to be regime loyalists, it chose the latter. In the early years of Saddam’s presidency, as this letter described, the regime populated many of its new religious institutions with Party loyalists as opposed to influential and well-known religious leaders. Nevertheless, as the letter also demonstrates, religious leaders learned fairly quickly that joining these institutions provided real benefits and that the only real requirement was demonstrating absolute loyalty to Saddam’s regime. Hence, in the letter, before the authors discussed their complaint and suggestion, they made clear their understanding that the regime’s primary concern was political loyalty. They left no doubt about their strident support for the Ba’thist regime, and in exchange for financial support, they offered their legitimacy and influence.

The Army

The regime’s attempt to gain control of religious discourse in Iraq was as urgent as it was necessary to counter the Iranian brand of revolutionary Islam that some Ba’thists feared could metastasize in Iraq. However, as much as the conflict with Iran threatened to incite problematic interpretations of Islam, it also provided the Ba’thist regime with opportunities to map and penetrate Iraq’s religious landscape. Between 1980 and 1988, Iraq fought a long and bloody war with Iran. Iraq mobilized much of its population for the war effort, increasing the size of its military by 350 percent.122 With this came a greater need for military chaplains. This chaplain corps consisted mostly of Islamic (both Sunni and Shi’i) scholars and sermon-givers. Their primary purpose was to provide religious guidance to the soldiers fighting on the front lines, reassuring them that their cause was just and Islamically acceptable. Of course, the regime also used these religious leaders in its propaganda. To demonstrate Iraq’s Islamic credentials, the

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122 Rohde, *State-Society Relations in Ba’thist Iraq*, 43
Iraqi press ran feature stories about the chaplains and their role in the war.\footnote{See for example: \textit{al-Jumhuriyya}, April 1, 1983.} Yet, the expansion of the army’s chaplain corps also played an additional, easily overlooked role in the regime’s policy of encroachment upon the religious sphere. Each army chaplain, in addition to being a trained religious leader, also became a military officer and thus was required to undergo the same extensive background check as other officers.

An applicant wishing to become an army chaplain was required to provide extensive information to the regime. This included which schools he had attended and his employment history. The regime investigated his father, brothers, and uncles, whether or not he had ever been convicted of a crime, and if he had belonged to any political parties or organizations. Following the investigation, regime officials then completed a form on each applicant outlining, among other things, his “political orientation,” “personal characteristics,” “the reputation of his family,” his “integrity,” and whether he had “any relatives, to the third degree, who had committed crimes.”\footnote{For an example of an investigation on an applicant to become a military chaplain, see: Various Documents, \textit{BRCC}, 015-4-5 (0001-0014), 1992.} This was invaluable information for a regime attempting to understand and control the religious landscape.

As the war progressed, the number of religious leaders in the Army increased considerably. They formed a unit called Muhammad’s Guard, and regime reports show that up to 2,000 of them at a time were operating on the front lines.\footnote{\textquoteleft\textquoteleft Intelligence Reports and Correspondence about the Situation in the Arabian Gulf (Persian Gulf) and the Foreign Military Presence in the Gulf,” \textit{CRRC}, SH-GMID-D-000-526, December 1986.} Sometimes, especially during the early years of the war, Shi‘i scholars were sent into captured Iranian territory to express their support for Saddam and to denounce Khomeini to the local population.\footnote{Ofra Bengio, “Iraq,” in Colin Legum, Haim Shaked, and Daniel Dishon, eds., \textit{Middle East Contemporary Survey} \textit{5}, \textit{1980-81} (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 584.} By the final years of the war, the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Abdullah Fadil, claimed that there
were 4,250 men of religion in the Army.\textsuperscript{127} For the regime, this meant that it now had thousands of religious leaders who had been through extensive background checks and could be trusted. Some of these chaplains undoubtedly came from families with a tradition of religious scholarship. Therefore the investigations unearthed important information about larger networks of scholars as well. This mapping of the religious landscape in Iraq was invaluable to the regime.

**The Popular Islamic Conference**

Most of the cases discussed thus far deal with local or low-level religious leaders. However, the regime also set up a system to co-opt religious scholars who possessed – or sought – a national or even international reputation. The most important institution in this system was the regime-sponsored Popular Islamic Conference in Baghdad. This conference was attended by well-known and well-respected Islamic scholars from around the world. They came together in Baghdad because either they or the states they represented disliked Khomeini’s Islamic revolution and had aligned with Saddam in his war against it.

The Ba‘thists had very little experience in dealing with these international Islamic networks. Therefore, they turned to Saudi Arabia, which was assisting Saddam in his efforts to bring down the Iranian regime. The Saudis dispatched Ma‘ruf al-Dawalibi, an ex-Syrian Prime Minister who had been spearheading Saudi Arabia’s Islamic diplomacy. Tapping into Saudi networks, he helped bring 280 religious scholars and activists from 50 countries to Baghdad for the first Popular Islamic Conference in April 1983.\textsuperscript{128} Then, in 1985, over 300 participants, including the head of the Saudi-sponsored Muslim World League, an official Egyptian


delegation, the Moroccan Minister of Endowments, and the director of the Deobandi Dar al-
‘Uulum in Karachi attended the Second Popular Islamic Conference.\textsuperscript{129}

Having attracted a number of well-known Islamic leaders from around the world, these
conferences provided the regime with a means to entice prominent Iraqi religious scholars as
well. Participation in the conference was prestigious, came with financial rewards, and allowed
one to rub shoulders with influential figures from all over the Islamic world. In return, the only
sacrifice the regime asked of Iraq’s religious leaders was to forego their political independence.
All participants, both Iraqi and foreign, were required to support Saddam’s regime and blame
Iran for the continuation of a war between Muslims, which, as the participants repeatedly pointed
out, is explicitly forbidden in the Qur’an (verse 49:9).\textsuperscript{130} The more ambitious Iraqis also filled
leadership positions at the conference in which they made sure to guide the discussion in
appropriate directions. Saddam actively sought the support of Iraq’s Sunni and Shi’i Arabs as
well as Kurds, but as the conference was directed at countering Khomeini’s Islamically-themed
propaganda, he was especially keen to include prominent Shi’i scholars.

Chapter 3 will deal specifically with the regime’s relationship to the Shi’i religious
establishment, but here it is worth stating that Saddam invited the leading Shi’i scholars in Iraq,
such as Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khu’i and prominent members of the Hakim family, to join
the conference. However, citing their insistence on remaining apolitical, they all refused. The
regime had feuded, often violently, with the Hakim family for over a decade, and this rebuff
brought the relationship to a boil. The next month, 90 members of the family were arrested.
Several of them were executed in front of their relatives.\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{129} See: \textit{Waqa’i’ al-Mu’tamar al-Islami al-Sha’bi al-Thani} (Baghdad: The Iraqi Ministry of Endowments and
Religious Affairs, 1986).
\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Waqa’i’ al-Mu’tamar al-Islami al-Sha’bi}. 4.
Unable to attract senior Shi‘i scholars, the regime offered the conference’s money and prestige to lesser-known figures from prominent families. In doing so, the Ba‘thists hoped that while these scholars may not have been as well known, their family names would invoke the authenticity and authority that the regime desired. A prime example of this phenomenon was ‘Ali Kashif al-Ghita’. Though he had not distinguished himself as a scholar in his own right, he came from the Kashif al-Ghita’ family, which had been one of the most important scholarly Shi‘i families of the 19th and 20th centuries. Both the regime and ‘Ali Kashif al-Ghita’ used this for their mutual benefit. The regime gained the support and blessings of a Shi‘i scholar from an immediately recognizable and highly respected family, and ‘Ali Kashif al-Ghita’ received prestigious titles and financial rewards. This was not the first time the regime had turned to ‘Ali Kashif al-Ghita’. In 1981, when it had required a fatwa from a Shi‘i authority denouncing Khomeini as a heretic, he had provided one.132 Now, in 1983, the regime called upon him once more, this time to convene the Popular Islamic Conference.133

The regime’s difficulty in finding prominent, traditionally trained, yet trusted religious scholars was not limited to the Shi‘is, however. It had trouble in this regard even among Sunni Arabs. Thus, the Secretary-General of the conference for most of the 1980s, Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma‘ruf, was not a traditional religious scholar; rather he was a secular Ba‘thist historian of Islam. Ma‘ruf would lead the Ba‘thist efforts in the Islamic sphere throughout the 1980s and he typified the type of official upon whom the regime based it religious policies during the period.

Born into a prominent middle class family in 1940, Ma‘ruf had benefited from the new, secular, state education system in mid-20th century Iraq. His father was a lawyer and ensured that he received the best possible education. Ma‘ruf excelled at every level, graduating from high

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133 For his role, see: Waqa‘i‘ al-Mu‘tamar al-Islami al-Sha‘bi.
school with honors in 1960. He entered Baghdad University that year where he studied Islamic history, eventually earning a BA (1964), MA (1965) and PhD (1976). As was customary for ambitious young scholars in Iraq, Ma‘ruf also spent significant periods studying abroad. However, unlike traditionally trained Islamic scholars who traveled to centers of Islamic learning, such as Mecca, Medina, or al-Azhar in Cairo, Ma‘ruf went to Germany to study history at Hamburg University and then to the secular Cairo University in Egypt. Thus, socially and educationally he had more in common with secular Ba‘thists – whose base of support was firmly entrenched in the newly urbanized middle class – than he did with traditional Islamic scholars, who continued to attend study circles in religious seminaries and mosques. Tellingly he wore a suit and tie, not the garb of a religious scholar, and some more traditional Iraqis even questioned whether or not he prayed regularly.134

Ma‘ruf helped the regime reach out to religious Iraqis. His background allowed him to integrate comfortably into secular Ba‘thist circles, and indeed, he joined the Party. Yet, his deep knowledge of Islamic sources and history also garnered him respect among religious leaders. Under his leadership the regime increased the scope of its work in the Islamic sphere. By 1987, participants in the Popular Islamic Conference alluded to its increasing role in Iraqi affairs. The Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Abdullah Fadil, stated that it had recently expanded and was now assuming a major role in confronting Iraq’s challenges. Ma‘ruf al-Dawalibi, who was now named the chairman of its executive committee, praised “the Iraqi government’s limitless aid to the organization.”135 Official Iraqi media began to refer to it not only as a Popular Islamic Conference, but as the “Popular Islamic Conference Organization”

134 Ma‘ruf, Bashshar ‘Awwad, Interview by author, Amman, Jordan, July 11, 2011. Much of this information is drawn from Ma‘ruf’s twenty-five page C/V, which he graciously provided. For more on his role as the secretary general of the conference, see: Waqa‘i‘ al-Mu’tamar al-Islami al-Sha‘bi al-Thani.
(PICO) and the regime granted it a building in Baghdad to be used as a permanent headquarters.\textsuperscript{136} PICO then held numerous symposiums and began publishing books on Islam. In addition to providing the regime with potent propaganda, these new PICO endeavors created even more incentives with which to draw Iraqi scholars into a system of rewards in exchange for loyalty.

Most of the “scholarship” that PICO produced during this period sought to demonstrate the heretical and even un-Islamic nature of Khomeini’s Iran. It linked Iran’s Islamic Revolution to sectarian movements, especially among the Persians, throughout Islamic history.\textsuperscript{137} Though the regime attempted to prevent it, the discourse at these events sometimes included coded language and veiled attacks on Shi‘ism in general. The details of this phenomenon will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Coercion and Control

The processes of institutionalization, bureaucratization, and co-optation were pervasive throughout Iraq during the 1980s. By employing these tactics, the regime made considerable headway in encroaching upon and, thereby, controlling the religious sphere. However, these efforts were obviously more effective in some areas than others. Some religious leaders – among both Sunnis and Shi‘is – opposed Saddam and refused to work for the regime, no matter what benefits it offered. Also, in the Shi‘i areas of Iraq, religious scholars were less dependent on state finances and thus were less easily co-opted. In situations where the regime encountered


resistance to its penetration and control of the religious sphere, it resorted to more coercive tactics.

In the 1980s, the regime’s main hurdle to controlling religion in Iraq was regulating religious leaders who had previously enjoyed some degree of independence from the state, and who had no desire to sacrifice their beliefs or conscience. Believers who saw the regime’s policies as an assault on their religion could be particularly difficult to tame.\footnote{For example, see a fifteen-page report on an imam who refused to abide by the Ba’thists’ injunctions: \textit{NIDS}, 808023, 1988.} This became especially problematic for the regime when these religious leaders worked in mosques that enjoyed independent financing – especially if the financier lived abroad, and was therefore beyond the regime’s control – and were not managed by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. As the regime worked to gain control of the religious landscape in the 1980s, it encountered this problem quite regularly. Therefore, a pillar of its strategy was to bring all Iraqi mosques under the control of the ministry, eliminate independent or at least un-vetted financing of religious institutions, and enforce compliance among all of Iraq’s religious leaders. To accomplish this, Ba’thists regularly attended the various mosques in their areas and reported what they found to the Party hierarchy. Examining one such encounter between a Ba’thist and a non-compliant sermon-giver illuminates this process, and helps to clarify the regime’s policies.

In March 1986, a Ba’thist attended a local mosque for the Friday sermon in Baghdad. He was dismayed to see that the sermon-giver “did not call for our [Ba’thist] leadership or for the victory of our army over its enemies despite the fact that he was instructed to do so.” The Ba’thist approached the sermon-giver and informed him that is was necessary to discuss these issues in his sermons. The Ba’thist also emphasized the sermon-giver’s duty to convince people to donate to the Iraqi Army and assist it in the fight against the Persians. The sermon-giver
responded that he had not been instructed to do so. The Ba‘thist assured him that he did not need explicit instructions on these matters, because the Qur‘an itself clearly mandated that he support the Ba‘thist regime against its enemies. The sermon-giver acquiesced and stated that he would do as instructed in his sermon the following week.

The next week, the Ba‘thist returned to the mosque for the Friday prayer, but again the sermon-giver did not discuss the required topics. Instead he lectured those in attendance on hypocrites (munafiqun), which was a thinly veiled attack on the Ba‘thist regime’s appropriation of religion. Moreover, the sermon-giver did not use the microphone in the hope of hiding his sermon from those outside the mosque. The Ba‘thist then had another, slightly sterner conversation with him. The next week the sermon-giver stood up and announced that he would no longer give sermons. This was undoubtedly a protest against the Ba‘thist’s continued attendance. Nevertheless, the sermon-giver continued to live in the mosque. In fact, he had just built rooms for himself and his new wife.

The Ba‘thist submitted a handwritten report about his encounter with the sermon-giver to his local Party office and pointed out, additionally, that the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs did not own the mosque in question. He believed it had a private owner who lived outside Iraq.139 A Ba‘thist official then typed a report highlighting the important elements of the encounter. The report was forwarded up the Party’s chain of command, first to the Baghdad Bureau (tanzim), and then to the Party Secretariat. The Party Secretariat contacted the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, informing it that the sermon-giver had

demonstrated “a lack of commitment to the Party’s guidance” and instructed it to “take the appropriate action.”

In cases such as this, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs would work with the security services to arrest the rogue sermon-giver and identify the financier of the mosque. If the ministry could not vet and control the financier (as in this case when he was residing abroad), it would confiscate the mosque and bring it under the ministry’s direct management. As this case aptly showcases, however, the regime’s first inclination was not to resort to violence. The sermon-giver was given several opportunities to comply. If he had done so, the regime probably would have continued to view him with suspicion. The black mark against his record would not have been expunged and he would not have been eligible for a position in one of the regime’s religious institutions discussed above. Yet, as long as he remained compliant, he would have been permitted to continue preaching.

Even after his arrest, there was still a possibility for redemption. Saddam favored psychological manipulation as a means to win over potential enemies. As Wendell Stevenson and Kanan Makiya have each shown, one particularly Machiavellian tactic that Saddam employed was to have the regime sentence a transgressor to death; then at the last moment Saddam would intervene, not only pardoning the condemned man, but restoring him to his previous position and sometimes even promoting him. This would create a personal debt to Saddam for one’s life and livelihood. Apparently, Saddam also employed this tactic with religious leaders. The regime’s archives contain lists of imams and sermon-givers who were

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141 Wendell Stevenson, The Weight of a Mustard Seed (London: Atlantic, 2009), 58-9; Makiya, Republic of Fear, 135.
sentenced to death and then pardoned. Though, of course, not everyone’s death sentence was treated in this happy manner. The regime did not hesitate to carry out the grisly task, or worse, when it felt there was no alternative. These harsher policies will be detailed further in a Chapter 4, which covers religious opposition movements.

**Christians**

Thus far, the focus of this chapter has been on Islamic institutions and Muslim religious leaders. It should be stressed, however, that the regime also applied its strategy of co-opting and coercing to Iraq’s Christian minority. Similar to its policies toward Islam, the regime offered financial assistance to loyal Christian religious leaders and built new religious centers through which it could institutionalize Christianity in Iraq. The regime then co-opted Christian leaders both to help control Iraq’s Christian population and to bolster Iraqi propaganda. Thus, in the early 1980s, the Iraqi press regularly carried stories claiming “Christian men of religion are not immune from Khomeini’s persecution,” and that “Christian men of religion denounce Khomeini’s actions and his corrupt regime.” In such instances, Iraqi Christian leaders discussed the dangers that Khomeini’s Islamic revolution posed to their community and to their co-religionists in Iran.

Despite these media portrayals, Iraq’s Christian leaders often attempted to preserve their independence and were not always willing to be incorporated into the regime’s authoritarian system. Thus, to co-op or coerce – whichever the situation called for – Iraqi Christianity, the regime relied on Christian Ba’thists who lived and worked in the community. In the Ba’th Party archives, for example, one finds files on Christian Ba’thists who were instrumental in surveying the Christian religious landscape and reporting on its religious leaders. These Christian Ba’thists

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142 For an example of such a list see: *NIDS*, 786904.
were also indispensable in the regime’s penetration and management of churches as well as Christian social and religious clubs. Yet, while these Ba'thist Christians were certainly more capable of operating in Christian circles than a Muslim would have been, they were not always welcome.

In 1983, for instance, one such Christian Ba'thist reported that he had attended a two-day festival held by the Syrian Orthodox community. This festival was held after “the historic decision of the Revolutionary Command Council to grant cultural rights to Assyrians.” However, he was surprised to find that there were no slogans or banners at the festival celebrating the Revolutionary Command Council’s decision. The opening ceremony, for example, only dealt with Syrian Orthodox themes. This was especially troublesome because the man who delivered the opening address was instructed to speak about the regime’s decision. The Christian Ba'thist was dissatisfied and he made his displeasure known to the bishop.

Later, the same Christian Ba’thist attended a youth seminar held by the Church. At this event, he alerted the same bishop that a number of problematic people were in attendance. Apparently they were members of a non-political Christian organization which, therefore, did not openly support the Ba'thists. Despite this, the Christian Ba'thist was “surprised that the bishop defended them.” Then, to make matters worse, he reported that the bishop “accused me of trying to sabotage the sect by spreading the ideology of the Party in its ranks. Accordingly, he told me not to interfere in the affairs of the sect.” The bishop then decided to suspend the seminar as long as the Ba’thist remained in attendance.

The Christian Ba’thist, however, refused to back down and he “continued to speak with some of the youth.” He also gave the bishop a number of orders: 1) The bishop must support the Party and the revolution in his blessings and he must ensure that all religious organizations –

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145 For an example of a file on one such Christian Ba'thist, see: BRCC, 2522_0000, 1970s-80s.
including the one whose members were present at the event – supported the Party; 2) These religious organizations needed to hold elections and select people who would carry the responsibility for the sect and the homeland (watan). Though he does not explicitly say so, it is clear that in these “elections,” regime loyalist would be “elected.” And finally, 3) it was necessary to “culturally indoctrinate and raise the consciousness of the youth on the issues of Iraqi patriotism (wataniyya) and progress.” These are the same tactics that the regime applied to Islamic leaders and institutions discussed above. Religious institutions were preserved wherever possible, but were stripped of their independence and put at the regime’s disposal. Through these policies, the regime also hoped to bring Iraqi Christianity completely under its system of control.

Nevertheless, as the Ba’thist reported, “The bishop refused to comply, and he began to close the doors of the archdiocese and the churches so that the seminar could not be held for three consecutive weeks.” The bishop understood the regime’s tactics and if he could not keep the seminar independent, he at least wanted to prevent it from becoming an instrument of the Ba’th Party. The Christian Ba’thist attempted to persuade him, but, as he reported, the bishop “continued stubbornly in not holding the seminar.”

The Christian Ba’thist ended his report by stating that the bishop was against the Ba’th Party, and for good measure, he accused him of having connections with the Muslim Brotherhood. He then stated that the regime needed to replace some of the Christian organizations, and that elections needed to be held for them. Through these elections, the regime could insert Ba’thists or their allies into the leadership, and thus control the organizations. Finally, the regime needed to inform the bishop that the youth seminar would no longer be
permitted.\textsuperscript{146} The Christian Ba‘hist’s report was then forwarded to the security services (\textit{al-amn al-\textsuperscript{'}amm}) so that it could deal with the transgressors, and enforce his recommendations.\textsuperscript{147}

As this incident demonstrates, the regime’s strategy for controlling Christianity was similar to its approach toward Islam. It wished to use existing institutions because they possessed the authority that the regime coveted. The regime hoped to hollow out these institutions and then fill them with loyalists. These loyalists would transform the institutions into components of the Ba‘hist regime. The regime only resorted to coercion when Christian religious leaders resisted its “recommendations,” as they, along with their Muslim counterparts, often did. As such, the Christian Ba‘hist spent three weeks attempting to convince the bishop to restart the youth seminar. The Ba‘hist did not wish to destroy the seminar, but rather to control it and to use it. Only after concluding that he could not co-opt the bishop did he shut his seminar down.

The regime employed these tactics continuously throughout the 1980s. It gradually worked to identify mosques, churches, and religious leaders who on one hand were either loyal and should be supported, or on the other hand were suspect and thus needed to be dealt with in some fashion. In doing so, it worked diligently to bring Iraq’s religious landscape under its control and to eliminate independent religious activity throughout the country.

\textsuperscript{147} “Actions of the Bishop,” \textit{BRCC}, 2522_0000 (0431), February 25, 1983.
Chapter 3: Co-opting and Coercing Shi‘ism

The previous two chapters laid out Saddam’s strategy to co-opt and coerce the religious landscape in Iraq during the 1980s. During this process, his regime wished to downplay the role of sects in the name of “unity” – which was one of the pillars of Ba‘thist ideology. As such, the plans outlined in the previous chapter were an attempt to apply unified policies to both the Sunnis and the Shi‘is in Iraq. However, the regime’s aversion to recognizing sects was an ideological preference that did not always address the realities of Iraqi society. Thus, while the regime intended to apply the policies discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 to all Iraqis, they were often less successful among Iraq’s majority Shi‘i population.

For example, the Shi‘i religious scholars’ income came directly from their followers though a religious tax, which required all Shi‘is to pay one fifth of their salary to the religious establishment. This tax did not exist in traditional Sunnism.\textsuperscript{148} Sunni scholars were, therefore, much less financially independent and much more susceptible to the regime’s financial overtures. The Shi‘is of southern Iraq also had long established religious seminaries, particularly the hawza in Najaf, which were among the holiest and most prestigious centers of Shi‘i religious learning in the world. The regime could not easily lure away Shi‘i students by constructing new religious schools under Ba‘thist control or replace scholars who were educated in these venerable institutions with those educated in regime sponsored schools. Furthermore, Shi‘i rituals include large public commemorations, which tend to bring masses out into the streets. These commemorations could, and sometimes did turn into sectarian political rallies, in which the regime felt compelled to intervene.

\textsuperscript{148} Traditionally, Sunnis were required to pay a similar tax on the spoils of war, but in the modern period this rarely occurs, and it could not support Sunnis religious schools in the same way as their Shi‘i counterparts.
Hence, the means that the regime employed to control the religious landscape in other areas of Iraq were not easy to replicate in the Shi‘i regions. Moreover, because southern Iraq contained Shi‘ism’s holiest sites and centers of learning, the Iraqi Shi‘is were deeply connected with the wider Shi‘i world through pilgrimages and foreign students. Iraq’s Shi‘i scholars were especially closely linked to Shi‘ism’s other important center of learning in Qom, Iran. The transnational character of Iraqi Shi‘ism – particularly because of its strong ties to Iraq’s chief adversary, Iran\footnote{For more on Shi‘i transnationalism in Southern Iraq, see: Elsheva Machlis, *Shi‘i Sectarianism in the Middle East: Modernisation and the Quest for Islamic Universalism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); Meir Litvak, *Shi‘i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq: The ‘Ulama’ of Najaf and Karbala’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Elvire Corboz, *Negotiating Loyalty across the Shi‘i World: The Transnational Authority of the al-Hakim and al-Khu‘i Families* (Oxford University: Doctoral Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, 2009).} – was problematic for a regime that insisted on controlling everything within its borders.

Thus, despite the regime’s preference for a single unified policy toward all Iraqis – regardless of religion or sect – it was forced to adapt to the realities on the ground. If it wished to incorporate all of Iraq’s religious communities into its system of authoritarian control, it could not afford to rely on policies which were ill-suited for the majority Shi‘i population. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the distinct policies that the regime used to gain control over Iraqi Shi‘is and indeed, though less successfully, Iraqi Shi‘ism during the 1980s. Of note, a particularly important part of the regime’s policies toward Shi‘ism in Iraq was its fight against Shi‘i Islamists. While this chapter will touch on this topic, the regime’s struggle against Iraqi Islamists will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 4.

**The Ba‘thist View of Iraqi Shi‘ism**

For some time, much of the secondary literature on Saddam’s Iraq promoted an overtly sectarian narrative of Saddam’s policies. For example, Charles Tripp argues that soon after the Ba‘thists...
came to power, they purged Shi‘is from their ranks. Then, Tripp asserts, Shi‘i opposition to the regime in the 1970s and early 1980s “sharpened Saddam Husain’s concerns about the hidden power of the Shi‘a and about the doubtful reliability of the Ba‘th Party in a crisis.” Therefore, Saddam felt the need to neutralize Iraq’s Shi‘i population as a whole.\textsuperscript{150} Others, such as Eric Davis, aver that Saddam’s supposed anti-Shi‘i policies in the early 1980s were not only intended to deal with threats from southern Iraq, but were also a means to solidify support among his sectarian Sunni base of support.\textsuperscript{151}

Recently, however, the availability of more sources has led some scholars to challenge parts of this narrative. Fanar Haddad, for example, argues that sectarian tensions were not inherent in the Ba‘thist regime’s treatment of Iraqi Shi‘is. Instead, he claims sectarian strife only manifested in 1991.\textsuperscript{152} Furthermore, as Dina Khoury, Joseph Sassoon, and Aaron Faust have noted, the Ba‘thist regime’s archives also challenges this narrative.\textsuperscript{153} For example, when the regime deported hundreds of Shi‘is from southern Iraq during the early 1980s, claiming that they were Iranians, most outside observers considered “Iranian” to be a crude euphemism for “Shi‘i.” Therefore, the secondary literature portrayed the regime’s policy as anti-Shi‘i.\textsuperscript{154} Yet, no sign of such a phenomenon exists in the regime’s archives. Ba‘thists viewed themselves as the most authentic Arabs and therefore the most authentic Muslims. They could not conceive that any true


\textsuperscript{152} Haddad, 13.


Arab would side with the Iranians against their Arab brethren. Thus, the regime felt that the Shi‘i opposition in Southern Iraq was necessarily a result of Iranian meddling and indeed, stemmed from the large number of Iranian nationals who resided there. Even in the Ba‘th Party’s most secret correspondences, regime officials depict the problems in southern Iraq as a struggle between Iraqi Arabs, and foreign (mostly Iranian) forces.\(^{155}\) In some important incidences, the regime appears to have been almost unconcerned with Sunni-Shi‘i sectarianism among Arabs. For example, the questionnaires that Iraqis filled out during security investigations for sensitive positions asked for one’s “nationality” (i.e. Kurd or Arab) and “religion” (i.e. Muslim or Christian), but did have a place to mark whether one was Sunni or Shi‘i.\(^{156}\) Likewise, the regime kept inventories of Ba‘th Party members who were Kurds so that the regime could closely monitor them. There was no equivalent for the Shi‘is in the Party.\(^{157}\) The regime simply did not see Shi‘ism as a problem and Shi‘is were not targeted as Shi‘is. In fact, as Khoury explains, “most of the upper echelons of the local party cadres were drawn from long-time residents.” Thus, in Shi‘i areas, the officials who were accused of having an anti-Shi‘i bias were themselves Shi‘is.\(^{158}\) This phenomenon is also reflected in the trove of oral histories which have been recorded since the fall of the regime.\(^{159}\)

This is not to say that there were not some regime’s policies that were problematic for the Shi‘is. Certain aspects of Ba‘thism could be interpreted as inherently problematic for Iraqi Shi‘is.

The Arabic term “Ba‘th” is best translated as “resurrection.” Early Ba‘thists chose this name as a

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\(^{155}\) Faust, 255 and Khoury, “The Security State.” It should be noted that the question of Shi‘i versus Iranian is complicated by the fact that many Arab Shi‘is in southern Iraq did not possess official Iraqi national identity cards. They were, however, much more Iraqi than they were Iranian. This does not imply that no Sunnis viewed the problems emanating from southern Iraq in sectarian terms. However, the absence of such views in the archives demonstrated that the regime disapproved of such views and suppressed them.

\(^{156}\) See, for example, the forms: \textit{BRCC}, 2868\_0000 (0022-0042).

\(^{157}\) Of additional note, even these Kurds often held important and high ranking positions in the Party. “Inventory,” \textit{BRCC}, 2135\_0004 (0169-0175), September 18, 1988.


\(^{159}\) See the four seasons of \textit{Shahadat Iraqiyya} (Iraq Memory Foundation 2005-2008).
reflection of their desire to resurrect the golden age of Arab Caliphates. This was problematic for orthodox Shi‘is, who considered the first three Caliphs to be illegitimate usurpers of divine authority. Thus, some devout Shi‘is found it difficult to support official Ba‘thist ideology. The Ba‘thists’ pan-Arabism was also problematic for some Iraqi Shi‘is in that it transformed them from a majority in Iraq, to a minority in the larger Arab world. Finally, the regime did not discuss Shi‘ism openly as it wished to downplay any sectarian differences between Iraqis. In practice, however, this often meant Sunni dominance. For example, unlike in post-2003 Iraq, where there are two ministers of religious endowments (one Sunni and on Shi‘i), in Ba‘thist Iraq there was only one. He was supposed to represent all Muslims, but in practice, he, along with other senior religious leaders in the regime, was always Sunni. To make matters worse, the Ba‘thists’ ideological imperative of ignoring sectarianism allowed for sectarian Sunnis (as will be discussed in Chapter 5) to spread distinctly pro-Sunni ideas. Thus, while the regime paid tribute to Shi‘i sensibilities by zealously glorifying Ali, its official publications also insisted that all the Rashidun Caliphs be honored – a practice that is inherently anti-Shi‘i. Nevertheless, Fanar Haddad has made the important point that Sunni dominance of important regime offices was not always a sectarian tactic on Saddam’s part. What may have at first appeared as sectarian practices favoring Sunnis were often just Saddam favoring those with whom he enjoyed close ties. These were mostly Arabs from the region around his hometown of Tikrit, who happened to be Sunnis. Thus political appointments were less about sectarianism, than about loyalty and trust.\(^{160}\) Whatever the basis of these policies, however, the result was that the Shi‘is were excluded and that the official Islam promoted in Ba‘thist Iraq had a distinct Sunni flavor.

These factors certainly played a role in the creation of sectarian narratives about the Ba‘thist regime in Iraq. However, it is important to note that many of the ideas about the inherent

\(^{160}\) Haddad, 58-9.
incompatibility of Ba'thism and Shi'ism are problematic. They assume a static interpretation of Shi‘ism and Shi‘i identity that always outweighs other identities, such as Arabism, territorial nationalism, or class. Such ideas are also a-historical in that many of the early leaders of the Iraqi Ba‘th Party – including its first Secretary-General, Fuad al-Rikabi – were Shi‘is,\textsuperscript{161} and that Shi‘is continued to hold senior positions in the Iraqi Ba‘th Party until the regime’s demise in 2003.\textsuperscript{162}

Thus, while sectarianism certainly existed in Iraq during the 1980s, it must be emphasized, that this was not the regime’s intention. The Ba‘thists’ internal records showcase a system where (at least \textit{de jure}) Sunnis and Shi‘is were treated equally. Moreover, official discourse on Islam in Saddam’s Iraq was not strictly Sunni. Ironically, as outlined in Chapter 1, the person who had the most profound influence on Saddam’s view of “true” Islam was neither a Sunni nor a Shi‘i, but rather the secular Christian, Michel Aflaq. As the remainder of this chapter will make evident, the regime relied on this Ba‘thist interpretation of Islam – emphasizing Arabism, belief in God, and performing traditional religious rituals – to counter accusations of sectarianism, and to depict religious opposition to the regime in southern Iraq as Persian rather than as Shi‘i. Accordingly, the regime depicted this Islamist opposition (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4) as a crude Persian attempt to weaken the Arab nation and destroy its religion. The Ba‘thists described these Islamists as members of hostile Iranian nationalist parties that attempted to deceive Iraqis by operating “under the cover of religion.” Even secret documents not intended for public consumption often referred to Islamists simply as “Iranian Islamic Parties.”\textsuperscript{163}

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\textsuperscript{161} Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouk-Sluglett, “Sunni and Shi‘as Revisited,” 87.
\textsuperscript{162} Joseph Sassoon, \textit{Saddam Hussein’s Ba‘th Party}, 3.
\end{flushleft}
Nevertheless, the regime feared that the Iranian-backed opposition had strategically tied itself to the *marji‘* (the senior Shi‘i scholars who act as a source of emulation) and infiltrated traditional Shi‘i institutions such as the *hawza* and as well as Shi‘i religious ceremonies during the holy month of Muharram. These traditional institutions and ceremonies had deep roots in Iraqi society and in traditional Shi‘ism. If the regime wished to maintain any level of Islamic legitimacy and avoid outright confrontation with its Shi‘i population, it could not simply destroy them. This was particularly important during the 1980s, as the majority of foot soldiers in Saddam’s army during the Iran-Iraq War were Shi‘is. The regime relied on their loyalty for its survival and could ill afford to confront them through policies which they would perceive as anti-Shi‘i.

To manage this delicate situation, the regime created detailed plans to co-opt and coerce the religious landscape in Shi‘i regions of Iraq by infiltrating age-old Shi‘i institutions and gaining control over Shi‘i rituals. The most important – and most dangerous in the minds of the Ba‘thists – of these rituals occurred during the holy month of Muharram.

**Muharram Commemorations**

Shi‘i uprisings against the Ba‘thist regime began in the mid-1970s when Iraqi security forces interrupted a religious procession during the holy month of Muharram. These processions were part of larger Muharram ceremonies in which the Shi‘is commemorate the Battle of Karbala and mourn the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Husayn. They climax on the tenth day of Muharram, known as the ‘Ashura. During these ceremonies, large crowds assembled to march and to recite the Qur’an in remembrance of Shi‘i martyrs.

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Any unauthorized gathering of large numbers of people is inherently dangerous to an authoritarian regime. The fact that these gatherings had already exploded into anti-regime demonstrations in the past made them even more troublesome. Though this unrest had several causes – not all of them sectarian or religious in nature – the Ba'athists feared that the Iranians intended to undermine their regime by “employing religious celebrations” to, among other things, spark sectarianism, spread anti-regime and pro-Persian rumors, sabotage Iraq’s military, political, and economic sectors, and to “carry out assassinations of Ba'ath Party officials and people affiliated with the security services.”

Thus, whatever their cause, Saddam feared that these events, if not properly managed, could become a real threat to his rule. If he hoped to gain control over religion in Iraq, he felt that he needed to prevent these religious ceremonies from being “exploited” by Iran and the Islamists “for political goals.”

With Saddam’s ascension to the presidency and the increased emphasis he put on religious affairs, the regime began to formulate more structured approaches to handling the Muharram ceremonies. First, it was necessary for it to create security plans for each province and to coordinate the efforts of the Ba’th Party, the military, and the various security services. Accordingly, the regime created special unified councils for monitoring all areas of interests. These councils were also responsible for “diagnosing hostile elements” and putting them under particularly tight surveillance so that they could not exploit the events.

The regime was extremely cautious when implementing any security plan. The provincial plans ordered “the security services to create active agents from among the good Ba’thists, who were not susceptible to outside influence, to form headquarters that will back up the Party
Headquarters as a reserve force for dealing with emergency situations.” These forces were under the command of Party officials at the section (shu’ba) level. They were to be in constant contact with the provincial governor and the secretary general of the Party branch (far’), which was one level higher in the Party chain of command.168 Other Ba‘thists were issued weapons and directed to guard important and vulnerable locations throughout the province. These included gas stations, electric power stations, various communication infrastructure, mosques, shrines, and other municipal, religious and security buildings.169

All incidents were to be handled calmly and with strict discipline. To that extent, Party officials were ordered to specially select Ba‘thists who were “good, calm, and understand the religious character of the region.” They would work with the security services, who would return repeatedly to the shrines and religious centers to continuously monitor any negative phenomena and the “hostile people” who may have tried to exploit them.170 As discussed in previous chapters, the regime maintained tight controls over which Ba‘thists were permitted to engage in religious affairs. The same policy was applied when dealing with the Muharram ceremonies. Party officials ensured that “no party apparatuses participated … except those who were specifically designated for that duty.”171

During the ceremonies, the regime hoped to promote a Ba‘thist understanding of Islam and thus diminish Iranian and Islamist influences. They were especially keen to warn the citizens against the practices of “hostile client forces” which tended to be Islamist who the Ba‘thists considered to be Iranian backed reactionaries. The Ba‘thists felt that these Iranian backed Islamists reactionaries were distorting true Arab Islam into a Persian heresy. Hence, as the

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171 “The Occasion of the 10th of Muharram,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0566-0570), November 22, 1983.
regime records state, “the Party apparatuses generally guided [the people] in the necessity of avoiding backward practices that do no express the essence of religion.” Further, the Ba’thists and security forces assigned to deal with religious matters worked toward “creating general awareness among the citizens, helping them to reject sinful practices in society, to understand the true nature of religion, and to understand the principles of the Party concerning religion.”\(^\text{172}\) In the discourse of Ba’thism, “backward” and “sinful” meant Iranian and Islamist, while the “essence” or “true nature” of religion was, of course, the Ba’thists’ Arabized interpretation of it. Thus the regime’s outlook toward religion in the early 1980s is clearly discernible from these documents. It considered the opposition’s claims (that Ba’thism was anti-Islam) to be demonstrably false and thus the regime strove to undermine the opposition’s attacks not only by denouncing them as foreign, but also by emphasizing Ba’thist views of religion. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the regime’s official response to the Islamist challenge was not to change its view on religion; but rather to emphasize that traditional Ba’thism has always been pro-Islam and indeed was inspired by it. Senior Ba’thist officials considered their view of Islam to be widely misunderstood and thus they worked to clarify the Ba’th Party’s position to the general population.

The regime believed that the best means of accomplishing its goals in Shi‘i areas was through control of the husayniyyat, which are halls that the Shi‘is use for Qur’anic recitation circles and commemoration ceremonies during the month of Muharram. In an attempt to control them, the regime designated official Qur’an readers and preachers in every husayniyya as well as in Shi‘i mosques.\(^\text{173}\) The regime then circulated the lists of the approved individuals among

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\(^{172}\) “The Occasion of the 10th of Muharram,” *BRCC*, 23-4-7 (0566-0570). November 22, 1983.

the security services along with orders to prevent all others from performing these roles.174 “Administrative and Party apparatuses” also organized “meetings with the sermon-givers to tell them to raise enthusiasm [for the regime] and to denounce the racist Iranian aggression.” Specifically, they ordered these preachers to denounce “the leader in Tehran” for the “abuse of holy symbols in Holy Mecca during the Hajj” and to praise Saddam.175 Similarly, the Union of Women of the Najaf Branch of the Party held meetings with female readers of the Qur’an to relate “what is required of them” during these occasions.176

To further diminish the chance of unrest, the regime sometimes restricted the presence of youth at the reading circles, only permitting older men (kibar al-sinn) to attend.177 The security services also “set the time for ending the husayniyyat [reading] circles at nine in the evening.” However, the regime did permit some flexibility for those who cooperated with it on these matters. This, in turn, provided extra incentive for following the guidelines.178 Finally, to prevent large crowds from forming, the regime forbade the use of loudspeakers except inside the mosques and husayniyyat, and attempted – though less successfully – to restrict the distribution of food to crowds or to marchers in processions.179

These restrictive measures were paired with regime-sponsored ceremonies and propaganda that glorified the Ba’thist regime and depicted it as a champion of Shi’ism. In addition to the preachers and Qur’an readers who “repeatedly praised the party, the revolution, and the Victorious Leader, Saddam Hussein,”180 the regime ordered “the Directorate of the [Religious] Endowments of the province to hoist two large black flags to commend the sacrifice

174 In 1983, for example, the police were given a list of 163 authorized readers and told to prevent all others from doing so. See: “The Occasion of the 10th of Muharram,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0574-0582), November 8, 1983.
177 “The Occasion of the 10th of Muharram,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0566-0570). November 22, 1983.
179 “The Occasion of the 10th of Muharram,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0566-0570). November 22, 1983.
180 “The Occasion of the 10th of Muharram,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0566-0570). November 22, 1983.
of Imam Husayn” and “to aggrandize the redemption of his descendent the Victorious Leader Saddam Hussein (may god preserve him).”

**Ayatollah al-Khu’i and the Marjiʿiyya**

To effectively gain control of Iraqi Shi‘ism, the regime had to do more than simply control and manipulate Shi‘i ceremonies during Muharram. As in other areas, the Ba‘thists hoped to control religion by controlling religious leaders and through them, religious discourse. However, as mentioned above, the regime’s strategies of co-opting, coercing proved less effective among the Shi‘is. Iraq’s Shi‘is had their own institutions and finances that were traditionally independent of the regime’s control and many Shi‘i leaders proved that they were willing to suffer or even die rather than compromise their beliefs.

Compounding this problem was that the regime thought Iran oversaw the senior Shi‘i scholar – the marjiʿ (source of emulation). The Ba‘thists thought that the office of the marjiʿ had been politicized in the early twentieth century, and that Iran had worked to gain control over it, especially during the reign of the Shahs from 1925 to 1979. Thus they believed that Iranian attempts to meddle in Iraqi affairs had predated the Islamic revolution that brought Khomeini to power in 1979. For the Ba‘thists, the marjiʿ had become a pawn in the eternal conflict between Arabs and Persians. In their assessment, “the Iranians believe that the head of the Iranian state carries two features: religious and political. Indeed he is the leader of the Shi‘is in the Islamic world.” Thus, in the Ba‘thists’ view, Iran had succeeded in choosing the marjiʿ in Iraq according to Iranian political needs. For example, the regime believed that when a marjiʿ died, the Shah would send a letter of condolence to whomever he deemed the appropriate successor.

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would then become the new source of emulation for religious Shi‘is in Iraq. There is no basis for this assertion in independent scholarship, and one would be hard pressed to find a Shi‘i authority who agreed with it. Nevertheless, this Ba‘thist understanding of the nexus between Iranian politics and Shi‘i institutions in the early 1980s seems to have shaped Iraqi policy.

However, in the Ba‘thist view, Iranian control over an Islamic institution in Iraq was an unnatural state of affairs. The Arabs were the true leaders of Islam. Therefore, Arabs should control Islamic institutions and not permit them to be manipulated by Persians.

During the 1980s, the senior Shi‘i scholar in Najaf was the Iranian-born Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khu‘i. Much to the regime’s consternation, al-Khu‘i remained a-political and refused to publicly support either side in the Iran-Iraq War. Thus, regime reports stated that al-Khu‘i “continues to practice activities that are hostile to the Party and the revolution…” By hostile, the regime did not mean that he openly denounced Saddam and the Ba‘thists. Had he done so, he would have certainly been eliminated. Al-Khu‘i’s views and actions were more subtle. This was made clear in a report that listed the “hostile” acts for which al-Khu‘i was guilty. The list not only provides insight into al-Khu‘i’s stance toward Saddam but is also a good guide to the regime’s perception of what actions or beliefs warranted concern. It begins: 1) Al-Khu‘i and his sons continue to speak Farsi. 2) He tries to avoid following the official regulations concerning religious occasions and holidays. 3) He “embraces non-Arab elements, especially Persians…” and he offers Persian students and men of religion financial support. 4) “Al-Khu‘i’s position toward our just Party and against the evil Iranian enemy is not clear and not understood to a certain extent at this time.” And he does not express his views on the war despite the aggression of the Iranians and the cooperation between Khomeini and the Zionists. 5) Al-Khu‘i

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182 “A Religious Study on Marji‘iyya (source of emulation) at the Hawza,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0040-0041), undated, but probably from the early 1980s.
and his entourage encourage sinful/mistaken practices and thus encourage sectarianism. 6) His organization contains some students of religious studies who have avoided their military duty.\footnote{In the margins next to this claim, there is a note asking for more info on this. In other documents in this file, regime officials sent out requests for information on this topic and there are various reports that came back in which they attempted to track these students down.}

7) He tries to increase the number of Pakistanis, Afghans, and some of their families in Iraq. 8) He pays salaries to the families of “escapees and deserters.” 9) A delegation he sent on the Hajj met with delegations from Iran and the Arab Gulf states. 10) He works with the Hakim family members even though some of them have been imprisoned. 11) He does not attend memorials for the martyrs of the war.\footnote{[Untitled Report], \textit{BRCC}, 23-4-7 (0204-0206), February 14, 1985.}

These complaints represent the regime’s view of al-Khu’i during the 1980s. As the list made apparent, the Ba’thists’ main concerns were that he was not an Arab or a proponent of Arabism, and that he did not openly support the regime or its war with Iran. The regime had no respect for the tradition of political quietism within Shi‘ism. Ba‘thists considered the role of religious leaders as essential in maintaining morale during the war. Al-Khu’i, however, refused to play his part. He remained independent of the regime, both in his behavior and in his contacts to the broader Shi‘i world.

Unsurprisingly, the regime closely monitored al-Khu’i and the network of Shi‘i scholars under his patronage. Belonging to al-Khu’i’s network was not in itself condemnable. In fact, the Ba‘thists actively recruited them. Some of al-Khu’i’s followers worked for the regime and in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. One regime study from 1985 listed 65 men of religion who were part the al-Khu’i network but were loyal to the “Party and the revolution.” As such, the Ba‘thists distinguished between al-Khu’i’s followers who supported the regime and those who they suspected of disloyalty. The Ba‘thists were aware that some of al-Khu’i’s
followers refused to associate with other Shi‘i scholars who were loyal to Saddam. Predictably, the regime considered such scholars to be suspect. One could also raise the regime’s suspicion by not participating in various activities to support Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, or by having Islamist relatives, especially if they were members of an Islamist party.185

Most of the scholars in the al-Khu‘i network whom the regime considered suspicious were simply apolitical. However, if one did cross the line into open hostility, or if the Ba‘thists suspected a scholar of aiding the Iranians, the consequences could be dire. The regime had demonstrated its willingness to assassinate senior religious scholars in Iraq. In 1987, it killed al-Khu‘i’s son-in-law and his son-in-law’s brother for their refusal to condemn the Iranian assault on Basra. The bodies were dumped unceremoniously at al-Khu‘i’s house.186

**Ba‘thification of Shi‘i Religious Schools**

Efforts to monitor and control the al-Khu‘i network were often ad-hoc. In the above referenced reports, regime officials would simply write whatever derogatory information they had on the Shi‘i scholars in a memo or on a blank piece of paper. Unlike similar regime reports in the 1990s,187 there were no standardized forms requiring specific information which were in use throughout the country. In this period, each official created his own system and determined what was relevant to report.

However, in the early to mid-1980s, the regime began to develop larger, more systematic plans for dealing with the *hawza*. The regime was, to put it mildly, suspicious of the *hawza*’s independence and often accused it of being controlled by Iran. One report argued that “weakness

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185 “Study,” *BRCC*, 23-4-7 (0064-0072), February 23, 1985. For examples of these lists and reports on various scholars in the Al-Khu‘i network see: *BRCC*, 23-4-7 (0223-233) and (0235-0249).
187 See Chapter 10.
of the state” prior to the Ba‘thist coming to power in the 1960s permitted the hawza to be manipulated by colonialism, international oil companies, and Iran, among other nefarious forces. Moreover, because of this manipulation and control by outside forces, the hawza had spawned political organizations that mislead the people by disguising themselves “under the cover of religion.”

To deal with this situation, Saddam ordered at least two high level committees (and possibly more) to investigate the hawza in the early and mid-1980s. These committees were tasked with determining an appropriate course of action for the regime and were headed by Saddam’s closest and most loyal associates. One was chaired by Saddam’s cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid (also known as Chemical Ali for his role in gassing the Kurds), and the other by Saddam’s deputy, Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri. The directors of both of Iraq’s intelligence services (al-mukhabarat, and al-amn al-‘amm), as well as the director of the General Police, and the Ba‘th Party officials responsible for Southern Iraq also served on the committees. In each case, the committees assembled several times and met with religious leaders throughout the country. They created lengthy recommendations, which were forwarded to and then approved by Saddam. These reports then became the basis for policy toward the hawza and other Shi‘i religious institutions.

The reports reveal that on several occasions, the regime had considered eliminating al-Khu‘i and “to move the hawza from Iraq to Iran.” Yet the committees argued against this, as

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188 “A Religious Study on Marji‘iyat (source of emulation) at the Hawza,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0040-0041), undated, but probably from the early 1980s.
189 See: “The Hawza and Religious Schools,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0109-0146); [Untitled Report], BRCC, 23-4-7 (0174-0210). Both reports exist in several different forms with different dates, so it is difficult to date, but they are most likely from 1984 and 1985.
190 “A Religious Study on Marji‘iyat (source of emulation) at the Hawza,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0052-0055), undated, but probably from the early 1980s.
they feared it would only benefit their adversaries in Iran.\textsuperscript{191} Instead, they suggested “to strengthen the role of the hawza in order to serve the march [of the Ba’th] and the revolution.”\textsuperscript{192} In other words they thought it more prudent to keep the hawza under their control and to use it. Again, the Ba‘thists’ first inclination was not to fight or destroy the religious establishment. They preferred to keep traditional institutions in place, and then to co-opt them. In doing so, they could feed off the authority and perceived authenticity of these institutions while employing them for the regime’s purposes. This was a long and complex process, the fruits of which will be seen in later chapters covering the 1990s.

However, gaining control of the hawza was no simple task. The Shi‘i scholars closely guarded its independence and were willing to suffer considerably to maintain it. Since the regime was unwilling to eliminate them, it needed to find other means to bring them under its control. One of the most important policies the regime implemented in that regard was to take charge of the hawza’s finances. On one hand, the regime seized the endowments which the Shi‘i religious leaders had amassed and which they used to maintain their independence from the state.\textsuperscript{193} On the other hand, the regime itself began supporting the hawza financially and thus attempted to “reduce its dependency” on foreign funds (especially from Iran). In the regime’s estimation, this would “limit the deviant and sinful orientations” within the hawza and bring it in line with “the revolution and the Party.”\textsuperscript{194}

The Ba‘thists also used their control of the state to influence the hawza. In the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, even traditional institutions such as the hawza were required to work within the modern

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Religious Schools,” \textit{BRCC}, 23-4-7 (0088-0090), March 9, 1988.
\item “A Religious Study on Marjī‘iyya (source of emulation) at the Hawza,” \textit{BRCC}, 23-4-7 (0052-0055), undated, but probably from the early 1980s.
\item [Untitled Report], \textit{BRCC}, 23-4-7 (0174), February 14, 1985.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
nation-state system. For example, foreign students traveling to Iraq to study at the *hawza* required state-issued visas. The regime ordered the special security services in its embassies to investigate the political and social background of every potential student and thereby limit who could study in Iraq. In doing so, the security services developed relationships with and ensured the cooperation of all potential students. The embassies then forwarded the approved students’ information to the security services in Iraq, and as one report argues, “in light of this information, cooperation with these students [while] they are in the country is possible…” Further, the regime only offered them a limited visa, and thus, required the students to take part in continuing reviews. Extensions or renewals of the visas required that they continue to cooperate. That the regimes took such procedures seriously is indicated by the fact that it only permitted specially trained security officers - no less than the rank of Captain - to deal with these students.

The regime assessed that these students were vulnerable because “for the most part,” they “come from circles which need financial support, and therefore [the regime] can provide this for them.” In doing so, the Ba’thists felt that “it is possible to influence [the students] and to supply them with ideas on the Islamic religion and its luminous essence.” In other words, the regime hoped to indoctrinate them with Ba’thist interpretations of Islam. But, “as for the students who deviate from this approach, their residency will be revoked and they will be sent back to their countries.”

For Iraqi students at the *hawza*, the regime took a different approach. It chose 20-30 specific students and concentrated on giving them a proper “Party education” (read indoctrination) and on making them into “good comrades who are acquainted with religious matters.” After these students had been won over, they were then used to spy on and control the
others. When these students graduated, they were put on the budget of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs and sent to the various provinces to serve as men of religion. They would then help spread Ba’thist interpretations of Islam among the general population and to keep an eye on other Shi’i scholars who were not working for the regime. A select few of the Iraqi students were also used to manage the foreign students. As one report stated, a small group of Iraqis – “3 or 4 of the students from each province accepted in these schools in Najaf and Karbala” – was “chosen meticulously and soundly by the Party and security services.” These students became “a means to facilitate” the activities outlined above for the foreign students.

The Ba’thists students did not limit their activities to the classroom. They were also expected to concentrate their efforts in student housing complexes and in other more casual settings. The regime hoped that “the final outcome of applying the above” would be “the strengthening of the hawza in Iraq and its future management.” Importantly, this would be “carried out by Iraqi men of religion themselves and by not giving other nationalities (jinsiyyat) the opportunity to change them…”

This point also highlights one of the regime’s underlying assumptions about the problems it faced in Southern Iraq. Because Ba’thists viewed the opposition as stemming from the Persians’ age-old dislike of Islam’s Arab roots, and from their inability to properly understand Islam’s canonical Arabic sources, the regime insisted on the Arabization of the religious curriculum in Shi’i religious schools. In doing so, they hoped to neutralize Persian influences.

Along those lines, the committee reports discussed above demanded that that all religious students begin their studies with an emphasis on Arabic. As such, the regime insisted that a year of Arabic be added to the curriculum for all non-Arab students and that foreign students

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195 “A Religious Study on Marji’iya (source of emulation) at the Hawza,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0020-0058), undated, but probably from the early 1980s.
196 “Report,” BRCC, 046-3-6 (0624), September 9, 1984.
who knew Arabic be preferred over those who did not. A similar policy was created for teachers in the Shi‘i religious schools. As one report stated, “It is not permissible for any teacher of religious studies to speak in a language other than Arabic.” Teachers of religious studies were required to be either Arabs or foreigners who met special requirements and that did not take part in sinful (Islamists) practices. In instituting these policies, the regime also worked to bring the Shi‘i religious schools under its control. It hoped to create a “unified” curriculum among all religious schools in the country, regardless of sect, and to eliminate any school which attempted to preserve its independence from the regime.

The regime also formed a special committee composed of representatives from the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs to oversee “the wording of books, and volumes, as well as the approved curriculum for teaching in the religious schools.” The report noted that these restrictions not only applied to the textbooks, but to all books. Thus the committee recommended “the confiscation and destruction of religious books published by Persian elements, which contradict the Islamic Shari‘a and the essence of religion.” Grammatically, it is unclear whether this meant that all Persian books, by their nature, contradicted the Shari‘a, or whether only certain Persian books contradicted the Shari‘a, and that only those should be destroyed.

**Media and Cultural Indoctrination**

Similar to its approach toward the Muharram ceremonies, the regime also developed media and cultural indoctrination (*tathqif*) policies in its plan to control the hawza, the Shi‘i religious

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200 "A Religious Study on Marji‘iyya (source of emulation) at the Hawza,“ *BRCC*, 23-4-7 (0020-0058), undated, but probably from the early 1980s.
establishment, and the lay Shi‘i population in general. Thus, in the mid-1980s, the regime
ordered Ba‘thists who were designated to deal with religious issues to increase efforts to
“culturally indoctrinate” and win over Shi‘i men of religion. These efforts relied on the Arab
Shi‘is’ nationalistic and patriotic sentiments. The Ba‘thists attempted to demonstrate that
religious tendencies coming out of Iran were “hostile to the Arabs, and the Islamic religion” and
further, that Iran intended to divide the Arabs and Muslims in the Arab Homeland (watan).201

Similar tactics were used to target the Shi‘is in general. The Ministry of Endowments and
Religious Affairs worked with the media and the Ministry of Information to create and propagate
Ba‘thist religious propaganda. They were ordered to “adopt a cultural and media program” that
followed Saddam’s example in exhibiting “true religion” and exposing harmful distortions. More
specifically, they were to broadcast television series and movies that highlight “The Arab-
Islamic heritage”202 and that: 1) Demonstrate the truth about Persian views of religions, their
distortions of its principles throughout history, and their intention now; 2) Showcase “the ancient
and modern position of the Persians toward Arabs, citing their mistreatment of the caliphs, the
Prophet’s family, and his companions;” And, 3) Equate them with the Zionists as both of them
have evil intentions against the Arab world.203 The regime assessed that this type of programing
“had a positive psychological effect on the citizens…” Through it, the Party hoped to
successfully “culturally indoctrinate” the masses, and keep them away from “sinful practices
which are alien to the essence of religion.”204

201 “Religious Schools,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0088-0090), March 9, 1988.
203 “A Religious Study on Marji‘iyya (source of emulation) at the Hawza,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0051-0052), undated, but
probably from the early 1980s.
204 “A Religious Study on Marji‘iyya (source of emulation) at the Hawza,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0057), undated, but
probably from the early 1980s.
Developing a coordinated approach to implement these plans took several years. Yet by the mid-1980s, Saddam’s ideas had been converted into a steady stream of propaganda which saturated the Iraqi people. In 1984, the system was largely in place and Saddam praised the Iraqi press for its “excellent role” in depicting “our just nationalistic (qawmiyya) battle.” He then decreed that the media continue broadcasting religious films and television series that “research the essence of the Arab-Islamic heritage” and that demonstrated the “the Persian aggression on the Arab-Islamic heritage throughout history.” These programs were required to clarify the Ba'ath Party’s position on the issue of religion and to emphasize that the Party has strengthened the “heritage of the Orient (mashriq) for the Nation (umma),” though the regime’s records express concerns over whether it was able to successfully convey this message in the early years of the decade.

Saddam was especially keen to tie traditional Shi'i Islam to the concepts of Arabism, loyalty to the regime, and steadfastness in the battle against Iran. Thus he was adamant that the Iraqi media “express the pure values of the Arab character including sacrifice for the sake of principle…” and that the “characteristics of Imam Husayn are strengthened by adherence to these Arab values.” As such, Saddam ordered the media “to demonstrate that elements vindictive toward the Arab Nation (umma), especially the fire-worshiping (majus) Persians, are attempting to distort the values of Islam and Arabism, and especially the Arab character.”

To further these goals, a presidential decree stipulated that the Ministry of Culture and Information work with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs as well as the Ministry of Finance to determine what is needed to clearly demonstrate that the Party is committed to Islam and to preserving the shrines in Najaf and Karbala. These ministries coordinated their

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efforts. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs held large celebrations; the Ministry of Culture and Information ensured that these events would receive proper media coverage and that the correct messages would be delivered to the Iraqi population; and the Ministry of Finance funded the entire endeavor.

Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that during the early-to-mid-1980s, the Iraqi press gave considerable coverage to “large celebrations” in Najaf, which the regime held in memory of Imam Husayn, and to mark the birthday of his father, Imam Ali. Media reports on these events highlighted the role of Saddam, the Ba’th Party, and the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in promoting Shi’i Islam. They often report that the people used these celebrations to renew their pact of loyalty to Saddam. Thus, as these regime policies demonstrate, Saddam and the Ba’thists did not wish to prevent large Shi’i ceremonies, they actually encouraged some of them. It would be too crude to describe the regime’s policies as anti-Shi‘i; rather, the regime had a more nuanced approach to the community and its religious traditions. Its policy was to eliminate all manifestations of Shi’ism that lay outside of its control while at the same time promoting a regime sponsored, pro-Ba’thist Shi’ism.

The regime did not wish to destroy Shi‘ism or Shi‘is. Instead, the regime worked meticulously and over several years to bring Shi‘i scholars and institutions under its patronage and control. At the same time, it infiltrated Shi‘i ceremonies, co-opting them for its purpose of spreading Ba’thist interpretations of Islam that it hoped would be both acceptable to the Shi‘i masses and legitimize Ba’thist rule in Iraq. These efforts would take years to bear fruit, but as will be discussed in later chapters, they had a clear effect and would lay the foundation upon which the regime’s future policies would rest.

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Chapter 4: Suppressing the Islamist Opposition

The previous chapters have dealt with the Ba‘thist regime’s strategy to co-opt and coerce religious leaders into supporting the regime in Iraq. This was the regime’s preferred method of penetrating and controlling Iraq’s religious landscape. However, co-optation and coercion were not always viable means to deal with religious actors in Iraq. Some Iraqis held ideas about religion that the regime considered intolerable. The Ba‘thist saw no alternative to fighting these Iraqis and their ideas with all means at the regime’s disposal. Most Iraqis who fell into this lamentable category were members of various Sunni and Shi‘i Islamist political parties. Membership in any political organization other than the Ba‘th Party would necessarily result in harsh regime responses. The fact that Iraq was fighting an Islamist regime in Iran and attempting to manage an independent religious revival in Iraq made Iraqi Islamist parties even more dangerous. The regime was quite relentless in confronting them, and although it never completely succeeded in cleansing Iraqi society of Islamist parties, the progress that it made in driving them underground and out of Iraqi politics during the 1980s proved vital to shaping Iraq’s religious landscape in a way that would permit the regime to employ religion more actively in its political strategies during the 1990s. The Ba‘thists’ fight against Islamism in Iraq was long, difficult, and most of all, bloody. The Islamists were sometimes difficult to distinguish from pious but non-political Muslims. They also had a long history in Iraq and spanned a number of ethnicities and sects. All of these factors made them difficult to uproot. This Chapter will discuss the regime’s struggle with both Sunni and Shi‘i Islamists in Iraq during the 1980s.

Among Sunnis, the two most important Islamists groups during the 1980s were the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir. Both of these groups were dominated by Sunni Arabs.
In northern Iraq, a small Turkmen Islamic party existed and in the mid-1980s, the Kurdish Islamic Party was formed. However, neither the Kurdish nor the Turkmeni Islamist party attracted much of a following.

By contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood did enjoy significant support in Iraq. The Brotherhood is a Sunni Islamist movement that was founded in Egypt in the 1920s. In the 1940s, a Sunni Arab Iraqi named Muhammad Mahmud al-Sawwaf traveled to Egypt and met the Brotherhood’s founder, Hassan al-Banna. When al-Sawwaf returned to Iraq, he founded the Iraqi branch of the organization. The Muslim Brotherhood flourished in Iraq, attracting traditional Sunni Muslims who were concerned about the rise of the communism in the country. They pushed for a reformist rather than revolutionary approach to Islamizing Iraqi society and curbing secular reforms. In resisting the rise of leftist politics in Iraq, the Brotherhood felt solidarity with Shi‘is, and even reached out to the senior Shi‘i scholars in the hawza. However, sectarian differences prevented them from cooperating.

In 1960, the Iraqi Brotherhood officially registered to participate in elections as the Iraqi Islamic Party. It clashed with various authorities throughout the decade. When the Ba‘th Party came to power in 1968, it initiated a brutal campaign to crush the Brotherhood, and members of the Iraqi Islamic Party were forced underground or into exile. In 1971, the regime arrested large

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211 Tarik Hamdi al-Azami, “The Emergence of the Contemporary Revival in Iraq (Sunni Component),” 123-41.
numbers of Muslim Brothers including most of the organization’s leadership.\textsuperscript{213} The Iraqi Islamic Party was disbanded but the Muslim Brotherhood continued to operate covertly in mosques and other religious organization.

Like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-Tahrir is a Sunni Islamist political party tied to a larger transnational network. It was founded in the 1950s by a Palestinian named Muhammad Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani (d. 1977) and it maintained branches throughout the Arab world. The Iraqi branch of Hizb al-Tahrir was founded by Abd al-Aziz al-Badri in the 1960s. It was never as strong as the Muslim Brotherhood, and it had a tendency to splinter into smaller movements, but it continued to have a significant following when Saddam became president in 1979. Hizb al-Tahrir differed from the Muslim Brotherhood in several important ways. Perhaps most importantly, it wanted to overthrow the government and was against an educational or reformist strategy. Although it was a Sunni party, it was able to attract Shi‘i supporters and cooperated with the leadership at the hawza in Najaf.\textsuperscript{214} Sunni Islamists in the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir would continue to menace Saddam when he ascended to the presidency, but the threat they posed to his Ba‘thist regime paled in comparison to that posed by their Shi‘i counterparts.

A number of Shi‘i Islamist parties were also operating in Iraq when Saddam became president. The Da‘wa Party was the oldest and most important. Other groups included the Mujahidin and the Islamic Action Party. The Da‘wa Party, like the Muslim Brotherhood, had formed in the 1950s as a reaction to the rise of communist and leftist movements in Iraq. It had close ties to the senior Shi‘i religious scholars in the Najaf hawza. The ideas of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, which attempted to bridge the gap between Shi‘ism and modern

\textsuperscript{214} Rashid al-Khayyun, \textit{100 ‘am min al-Islam al-Siyasi bi-l-‘Iraq}, Vol. 2-al-Sunna, 110-111
politics, became an inspiration and central feature of the Da‘wa Party’s ideology. The party’s
goal was to undue secular reforms in Iraq and instead create an Islamic state governed by Islamic
law. Like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Da‘wa Party faced a wave severe repression when the
Ba‘thists came to power in 1968. However, unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, which remained
largely non-violent, the Da‘wa Party fought back. It played a pivotal role in several Shi‘i
uprisings during the 1970s. Then, in support of Khomeini’s Islamic revolution in Iran, the party
launched a full scale insurrection in southern Iraq in the late-1970s and early 1980s.

Other Shi‘i parties, such as the Islamic Action Party and the Mujahidin were much
smaller than the Da‘wa Party and were tied to specific scholarly families. The Islamic Action
Party was associated with the Shirazi and Mudarrisi families. The Mujahidin were connected
to the Hakims.215 These parties were independent and often maintained slight ideological
differences with Khomeini’s understanding of an Islamic State. For example, while followers of
the Islamic Action Party agreed with Khomeini that Shi‘i religious scholars should hold political
power, they disagreed with his conception of a single scholar holding absolute authority.216
Nevertheless, they generally supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. Furthermore, despite their
ideological differences with Khomeini, these Iraqi Shi‘i Islamist parties drew inspiration and
received considerable aid from revolutionary Iran. In November 1982, the exiled Iraqi Ayatollah,
Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, announced the formation of the Iranian sponsored umbrella
organization known as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which the
Iranians used to both support and coordinate the actions of Iraq’s Shi‘i Islamists.217 In the view

of the Ba’thists, these Shi’i Islamists posed an intolerable threat. Unlike other religious Iraqis whom the Ba’thists wished to co-opt and coerce into supporting the regime, Saddam considered the Islamists to be beyond the pale.

The regime relied on its Ba’thist understanding of Islam in the fight against Islamists. Because the Ba’thists interpreted Islam to be an Arab religion and inseparable from the imperatives of Arab nationalism, they viewed the Islamists’ tendency to put religious identity above Arabism as a distortion of the true religion. More specifically, they considered Islamism to be an Iranian perversion of Islam, which racists, anti-Arab, Iranian nationalists were employing to undermine the Arab nation. These ideas were not only present in Ba’thist propaganda, but also in the secret reports that the Ba’th Party and the security services regularly created on the opposition.\(^{218}\) These reports depicted Shi’i Islamists such as the Da’wa Party and the Islamic Action Party not as Shi’i but as Iranian or at minimum agents of Iran. The regime’s documents almost always inserted the word “client/agent” (‘amil) in front of their names. For example, the Da’wa Party was normally referred to as “The Client Da’wa Party” and regime reports claimed that the Da’wa Party had been backed by the Iranians since its founding. The regime considered Iran’s intentions in doing so to be hostile, and as one report stated, “this support aims to make the Da’wa Party a fifth column that can effectively achieve Persian aspirations in the eastern areas of the Arab Homeland.”\(^{219}\) Interestingly, the Ba’thist applied similar logic to the Sunni Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-Tahrir, which it also referred to as “clients” of unnamed hostile foreign powers.\(^{220}\)


\(^{220}\) See for example, “Activities of Hostile Parties and Movements,” BRCC, 027-3-5 (0112), March 5, 1986.
Tracking and Confronting the Islamists

The regime began keeping track of the opposition almost as soon as it came to power. However, in the 1960s and early 1970s, neither the security services nor their reports were as organized or effective as they would become during Saddam’s presidency. Thus, while one does find references to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Da’wa Party, and the Baha’is (the regime considered Baha’is to be a Persian heresy and a threat) in its domestic intelligence reports from the early 1970s, they are sporadic and unorganized.221 It is not until 1978–9 – just as Saddam is making his move on the presidency – that the reports become more formalized.222 From that point forward, in another sign of the regime’s increasing entrenchment – as well as the centralization and professionalization of the state’s civil, military and intelligence services – regime officials were required to file detailed biannual reports on all opposition movements. These reports listed specific activities of each group and were supplemented by reports from local Ba’th Party branches, which gave the exact numbers of known opposition members in each geographical area. These reports also correlated this information with that of previous yearly reports and thus demonstrated trends in opposition activity.

Because the regime had several security and intelligence services acting independently, it could cross check the reports to ensure that no organization reported false information. As such the jihaz al-mukhabarat, and al-‘amm al-‘amm both submitted similar biannual reports titled “Activities of Political Movements,” or occasionally “Activities of Hostile Movements” (the regime considered any “political” movement to be necessarily “hostile” and would thus use the

222 For example, some reports from the 1980s refer back to a November 1978 memo which orders all the Party Bureaus to create regular reports. See, for example: “Inventory of Political Movements,” BRCC, 2814-0003 (0081), September 20, 1981.
terms interchangeably). As mentioned, these reports were in addition to regular intelligence reports that the Party branches submitted on the opposition.

Some independent researchers may be weary of these documents. After all, a system which punished security officials for not finding and eliminating “the enemy” necessarily incentivized false confessions and fabricating records. Indeed, since the fall of the regime in 2003, numerous Iraqis have come forward to explain that they were horribly tortured and forced to give false confessions during the regime’s campaign against the Islamist opposition. Often, this put the detained Iraqis in quite precarious situations. In a typical example, one such Iraqi related that he was tortured and forced to give a confession for writing anti-regime graffiti. He was arrested with two friends. He insisted that the accusation was false, but he claims that he was tortured to the point where he would have confessed to anything in order to stop it. However, when he confessed, the interrogator asked him what color he used for the graffiti. He said black, but one of his friends said red, and the other said blue. They did not know about each other’s interrogations so they could not coordinate their responses. These discrepancies did not matter to the Ba’thist interrogators. They continued to torture them until all three agreed on a single color and then sent them to trial at a Revolutionary Court with the confession as proof of their guilt.223

In many of these cases the defendants were assigned a lawyer who instead of defending them would insist upon their guilt and request that the court punish them harshly.224 These cases probably skewed the regime’s records to some extent. Nevertheless, there are good reasons not to dismiss the regime’s records all together. First, the larger narrative that they provide generally

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correlates with what independent, outside researchers observed during the period.\textsuperscript{225} An Islamist uprising undoubtedly occurred in Iraq during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Then, in the early 1980s, the regime violently suppressed it. The regime’s records reflect these events. Moreover, the regime well understood that security officials in Iraq had an incentive to distort the records. Such distortions were not helpful to high ranking regime officials who required a clear picture of what was occurring in the country. Therefore, the regime leadership put in place a system of checks to help ensure that the information they received was accurate.

As mentioned above, the regime leadership received reports on opposition groups from two intelligence services and the local branches of the Ba'ath Party. If one organization attempted to misrepresent problems in its area of responsibility, it would be immediately obvious to the Ba'ath Party Secretariat, which reviewed and compared all the reports. For example, since the Party branches and the security services were responsible for maintaining control and eliminating the opposition, no one wished to submit a report which showed gains for the opposition. Occasionally, some officials did attempt to cheat the system. In one report from 1983, a Party official gave the correct number for the active opposition in his area, but added to the numbers from previous years so that the opposition’s gains would seem less dramatic than they actually were. The Party Secretariat quickly understood what had occurred, and in a very curt exchange, demanded not just a correction, but an explanation on why the discrepancy had occurred. The Secretariat gave the Branch two days to provide a sufficient explanation.\textsuperscript{226} The regime’s archives did not preserve the outcome of this incident, but one can assume it was not pleasant for the errant Ba’hist official. Yet, however unpleasant it may have been for those in the system, this series of checks and balances was beneficial to a regime which desired accurate information.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{225} See, for example: Chibli Mallat, “Religious Militancy in Contemporary Iraq: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr and the Sunni-Shia Paradigm,” 699-729
\textsuperscript{226} “Differing Statistics,” BRCC, 814-0003 (0043), March 9, 1983.
\end{footnotesize}
They are also helpful for researchers attempting to understand what occurred in Iraq during that period.

**Containing the Uprising**

In line with the regime’s wish to downplay sectarianism, the earliest reports did not distinguish between Sunni and Shi’i Islamists. For example, reports from the late 1970s have a section titled “The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists,” which included the activities and number of members for the Da’wa Party.\(^{227}\) Later, as the Ba’th Party apparatuses and regime security services became more organized and rigorous, they began to distinguish between the various Islamist movements. This distinction was also warranted because, as the reports demonstrated, from 1978 to 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni Islamists remained only a minor nuisance, but as the Islamic revolution erupted in Iran and the Iran-Iraq War began, the Shi’i Islamists made significant gains, emerging as a formidable force. For example, the reports from these years showed considerable growth (sometimes more than a 20 percent expansion in membership) of the Da’wa Party.\(^{228}\) This fact should dispel the notion that regime officials were unwilling to report bad news. At the beginning of the 1980s, the regime faced a crisis in southern Iraq, and its records clearly reflected that.

In response to this crisis, the regime launched a brutal campaign of repression. In 1980 the regime famously arrested and executed Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and his sister Bint al-Huda. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the regime also assassinated numerous members of the Hakim family, which had produced a number of important Shi’i scholars in the 20\(^{th}\) century and


continued to dominate the *hawza* when Saddam became president. Six members of the Hakim family were executed and 100 were detained in 1983. Ten more were killed in 1985, and later in the decade the regime assassinated Mahdi al-Hakim, (a grandson of Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, d.1970), while he was on a trip to Sudan.\(^{229}\) Hundreds of lesser known Da’wa Party members were also executed in a mass campaign, and thousands of Shi’is, whom the Ba’thists claimed were Iranian nationals, were deported.

The regime created new legal and procedural frameworks which made it easier for the security services to fight the opposition. Perhaps most importantly, the regime made membership in the Da’wa Party a capital offense. These legal and procedural adjustments assisted the security services in their campaign to combat Islamists and Islamism. For example, an Iraqi Shi’i later related that he first encountered the regime’s repressive apparatuses in 1975. He was attending a religious gathering and one of the other attendees was an undercover agent from the security services, who did not like what he heard. The undercover agent had the entire gathering arrested. Following this first incident, the Iraqi Shi’i was arrested twice more in the late 1970s, but the regime released him because it had nothing with which to charge him. Following the changes to the laws in 1981 the situation was different. It was easier for the security services to charge suspected Islamists and the penalties were much harsher. Thus, when the same Iraqi Shi’i was arrested again in 1982, he spent ten years in prison. He was only released in 1992, probably as part of the general amnesty.\(^{230}\) In some senses, he was fortunate to have survived. Many of his


counterparts did not. His story was one of thousands of cases in the well-documented campaign against the Da‘wa Party.\textsuperscript{231}

As mentioned in previous chapters, during this period the regime developed a cadre of officials who specialized in religious matters. With regard to security, Iraqis who were interrogated by the security services noted that special investigating officers “knew all about the Da‘wa Party” and “knew the [Da‘wa] Party members.”\textsuperscript{232} The Revolutionary Courts, which tried cases involving Islamists, also had special judges. One judge in particular, Muslim al-Jaburi, was well known to the defendants and travelled all over Iraq to try cases involving Islamists.\textsuperscript{233}

Iraqis who suffered under this system gave numerous reasons why they were persecuted. A woman was arrested for writing a letter to her husband in which she included a phrase, alluding to the victory of God in an eminent conquest. Others faced harsh consequences when they returned to pray at a mosque after the regime had warned them against it. The regime also targeted young men who attended unauthorized gatherings or who were “considered as outside the Ba‘th Party’s power.”\textsuperscript{234}

The Ba‘th Party records reveal numerous battles between Ba‘thists and Shi‘i insurgents, as well as the regime’s harsh tactics such as raids on hospitals.\textsuperscript{235} Iraqis who were arrested have since discussed brutal torture that included the use of electricity, rape, starvation, and being hung


\textsuperscript{232} Khalaf Abdul-Samad Al Awad, \textit{Shahadat Iraqiyya}, Disk 4, Season 3 (Iraq Memory Foundation, Recorded January 13, 2007).

\textsuperscript{233} For example in northern Iraq, see: Rida Abbas Amin Amin, \textit{Shahadat Iraqiyya}, Disk 3, Season 3, (Iraq Memory Foundation, Recorded December 11, 2006). For an example from southern Iraq, see: Aqil Yusef Naser, \textit{Shahadat Iraqiyya}, Disk 2, Season 3 (Iraq Memory Foundation, Recorded July 20, 2007).

\textsuperscript{234} Dawud Salman Shehab, \textit{Shahadat Iraqiyya}, Disk 1, Season 3 (Iraq Memory Foundation, Recorded January 12, 2007).

from the ceiling in positions that ripped apart their limbs.\textsuperscript{236} Despite the sectarian narratives that have surrounded the regime, much of the torture and fighting against Shi‘i Islamists in southern Iraq was carried out by other Shi‘is. Some Shi‘i Ba‘thists loyal to Saddam infiltrated groups such as the Da‘wa Party and acted as covert regime agents. For example, one Ba‘thist officially left the Ba‘th Party in 1980 so that he could “gain the trust” of Islamists. Working from within the ranks of the opposition, he was able to carry out various espionage operations as well as assassinations and arrests.\textsuperscript{237} Other Shi‘is recount Shi‘i Ba‘thists who arrested or even killed member of their own family for joining the Da‘wa Party.\textsuperscript{238}

Though the Sunni Islamists were never as great a threat as their Shi‘i counterparts, the regime unleashed a similarly harsh campaign against them. The regime reports showed Hizb al-Tahrir continuing its operations against the regime in Iraq, supposedly with the assistance of its sister branches in Kuwait and Jordan.\textsuperscript{239} The regime also feared that the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood was supporting Khomeini and his Islamic revolution. The state security services reported that religious leaders sympathetic to the Brotherhood did not mention the Iran-Iraq War in Friday sermons despite the fact that all sermon-givers were required to call for Iraq’s victory in the conflict. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood instructed its members not to participate in regime-sponsored events, such as the Popular Islamic Conferences, which the regime saw as vital in its campaign against the Iranians.\textsuperscript{240}

The regime’s response to such defiance was severe. As Osama Tikriti, a leader of the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood would later recall, the Ba‘thists executed large numbers of the Iraqi

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{236} See the four seasons of Shahadat Iraqiyya (Iraq Memory Foundation 2005-2008).
\textsuperscript{237} [Untitled], \textit{BRCC}, 2178_0001 (0072), August 27, 1995.
\textsuperscript{239} “Activities of Hostile Movements,” \textit{BRCC}, 027-3-5 (0252), June 24, 1985.
\end{quote}
Muslim Brothers in 1980-1. The campaign against the Brotherhood continued throughout the 1980s. Later in the decade, 72 members of the Brotherhood were arrested, of which 52 received various sentences during a major wave of repression.241

Nevertheless, these brutal tactics were only one side of the regime’s strategy. As discussed in previous chapters, the regime was willing to employ violence, but that was not its first inclination. It preferred to win over the opposition through more subtle tactics. The regime had a number of techniques at its disposal. In addition to crude methods such as blackmail and threats, Aaron Faust has argued that the regime “advocated including people who might have reason to oppose the Ba‘thist State in its activities so as to block other political movements from influencing them.”242 And, as previously noted, Saddam often attempted to gain the loyalty of adversaries through sentencing them to death and then personally pardoning them. Using this technique, he hoped that those who owed him their lives would not actively work against his rule, and sometimes would even be converted into his supporters. Thus, Saddam felt that in acting more strategically, he could eliminate the opposition while at the same time avoid creating even more enemies among the families and tribes of the condemned.

The regime’s records show that these less violent tactics had mixed results. On one hand, it was not uncommon for Da’wa Party members who had been arrested and then pardoned, to later return to subversive activities.243 On the other hand, a report from 1984 in which the regime documented its efforts to deal with “fugitives,” classified captured opposition members as either “arrested” or “repented” (nadiman). Thus, in the regime’s estimation, it was able to convince at least some of its opponents (those who had “repented”) to give up their opposition.244 Other

242 Faust, 199.
244 [Untitled], BRCC, 2664_0001 (0130-0133), 1984.
reports presented to Saddam at the end of the 1980s show significant successes in the regime’s efforts to win over its adversaries. These reports classified Islamists into four categories: 1) “fugitives,” 2) those who have been “sentenced” (and were thus presumably in custody), 3) those who had been “neutralized,” and 4) those who were performing “patriotic (watani) activities” (in other words, they were working for the regime). A 1989 report, for instance, stated that the Da’wa Party had 3299 members, of which 821 were fugitives, 2051 had been sentenced, 206 had been neutralized, and 221 were conducting patriotic activities. Thus, while the regime was never able to win over most Islamists, it was able to pacify some, and more importantly, to turn a significant number of them into active agents. Having over 200 Da’wa Party members working for the regime from within the opposition was a significant victory. The regime adeptly employed them to spy on and undermine its adversaries. It should also be noted that similar ratios applied to Sunni groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and “other political movements that used religion as a cover.” However, these were on a much smaller scale. By the end of the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood had been reduced to less than 100 active members: 28 fugitives, 20 sentenced, 28 neutralized, 11 conducting nationalist activities.²⁴⁵

Through a combination of violence and these more subtle tactics, the regime was able to steadily gain control over the Islamist insurgency that accompanied the Iranian revolution. Unlike earlier reports, the records from 1982-4, show the number of active Islamists leveling off and even decreasing in some areas. These regime’s records generally confirm the widespread independent assumptions that the regime had crushed the uprisings in the first year or two of the

1980s. Nevertheless, the Ba‘thists still struggled to maintain control of some regions, especially in the marshes along the border with Iran.

**The Islamist Opposition’s Demise**

Despite these gains, the regime was only able to limit, but never completely eliminate the Da‘wa Party or other Islamists. In that sense, Makiya’s argument in *Republic of Fear* – that Saddam had eliminated all his adversaries in the 1980s and thus in typical totalitarian fashion was forced to invent them – is an overstatement. The regime’s records show that insurgents and opposition parties continued their activities against the regime. Even in the mid-1980s, during the height of the regime’s crackdown, the Ba‘thists suspected that Da‘wa Party members were still working in the *hawza*, and the security services continued to catch young Shi‘i Islamists gathering information on vital sites in Iraq. There were constant attempts to assassinate Iraqi officials, especially men from the intelligence and security forces, and Islamist insurgents carried out various bombings and suicide attacks throughout Iraq. One 1986 report from the Director of Military Intelligence even uncovered a plan to assassinate Saddam during a visit to southern Iraq. The Ba‘thists feared that Islamists also indoctrinated Iraqis, making them more susceptible to the propaganda of what the regime termed “the fire-worshiping (*majus*) Persians.” To the regime’s dismay, Iraqi officials often found Islamists carrying photos of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and

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246 Patrick Cockburn argues that the uprising was essentially over as early as the summer of 1980. Cockburn, 50. See also, Chibli Mallat, “Religious Militancy in Contemporary Iraq: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr and the Sunni-Shia Paradigm,” 699-729


248 “Activities of Hostile Parties and Movements,” *BRCC*, 027-3-5 (0109-0111), March 5, 1986. For report on the attempt to assassinate Saddam, see: “Discovery of a Hostile Organization,” *BRCC*, 2074_0002 (0272-0278), May 22, 1986. For other opposition attacks on regime officials and headquarters throughout Iraq, see: [Various Reports], *BRCC*, 2135_0004 (0001-0131), various dates.
what the Ba‘thists described as “Khomeini the Anti-Christ” (khumayni al-dajjal).\textsuperscript{249} Even more disconcerting was that, as one report acknowledged, some soldiers fighting on the frontlines during the Iran-Iraq War had been “affected by religious propaganda,” and were surrendering to the Iranians as a result.\textsuperscript{250} In addition to soldiers, the Da‘wa Party competed with the Ba‘thists in attempting to win over the youth.\textsuperscript{251} Regime officials often discovered graffiti and Da‘wa Party slogans on the walls of schools. Da‘wa Party supporters would also sometimes write their slogans on small pieces of paper, insert them inside plastic balls, then throw them into the schoolyards so that children playing would pick them up.\textsuperscript{252}

However, as significant as these events were, they were manageable. Unlike periods of crisis in the early 1980s, in the middle years of the decade, the regime felt it had established control. By 1984, the regime had made significant gains in its efforts to undercut the Islamist opposition and penetrate the religious landscape in southern Iraq. Mass arrests continued, the security services became better organized, developed more efficient tactics and doctrine, and were able to insert or recruit more spies in opposition parties. This success gave the regime a clearer picture of the opposition and its membership. Thus, while intelligence reports showed an increase in the number of known Da‘wa Party members from 1984 to 1985, they noted that this was a result of the security services and the Ba‘th Party apparatuses gaining more information, not an increase in Da‘wa Party membership or activities. The actual number of Da‘wa Party members decreased.\textsuperscript{253} In 1986, the reports began to show a substantial decline in the number of Da‘wa Party supporters, and by 1987, if the reports are to be believed, membership in the Da‘wa

\textsuperscript{249} “Activities of Hostile Movements,” \textit{BRCC}, 027-3-5 (0063-0066), January 8, 1986.
\textsuperscript{251} For the Ba‘th Party’s efforts to win over the youth, see: Sassoon, \textit{Saddam Hussein’s Ba‘th Party}, 268-74.
\textsuperscript{253} “Inventory of Political Movements,” \textit{BRCC}, 2814-0003 (0018-0022), January 7, 1986. Of course this could simply be a case of regime officials making excuses, but as noted above, when there were actual increases in opposition numbers and activities, the reports said so.
Party was almost half of what it had been in 1985.\(^{254}\) During this period, the regime believed it had successfully undermined Shi‘i Islamists and its intelligence reports gloated that groups such as the Da‘wa Party had entered a “period of despair.”\(^{255}\) In the regime’s assessment, there were three general explanations for this success: 1) The most basic reason for the decline in Da‘wa Party supporters was because the regime had “assassinated” so many of them; 2) The regime was successful in its various attempts either to neutralized them or to convince them to leave the Da‘wa Party; And finally, 3) The regime assessed that much of the opposition had fled Iraq.\(^{256}\) Thus, while the regime was never able to eliminate its adversaries completely, it was able to instill order and reduce the opposition’s activities to a manageable level.

This control came at a cost. Despite the regime’s preference for winning over the opposition instead of simply executing them, it had nevertheless resorted to widespread violence and killings. This created a problem, as the scale of the violence meant that many Ba‘thists – especially among the Shi‘is – had friends and relatives who had been arrested, tortured, or killed by the regime. Saddam feared that the opposition could use this to turn these Ba‘athists against him. Thus, the regime was forced to implement a system of spiraling authoritarian policies for monitoring and controlling the Ba‘thists who in turn had been tasked with monitoring and controlling the general population. For example, in 1987, Saddam ordered a special investigation and assessment of each full Ba‘th Party member with a relative who had been executed by the regime. This assessment would determine if the member was at risk of being exploited by the opposition and, therefore, whether he could remain in the Party. A less stringent assessment was


conducted on full Party members who had family members sentenced to prison and on those below the rank of full member.\textsuperscript{257} Moreover, the regime sometimes made examples of security officials who did not strictly abide by the rules. In 1986, for example, it executed an intelligence officer for failing to report that his uncle and cousins were in the Da'wa Party.\textsuperscript{258}

Having installed an effective system of repression, Saddam then used the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 to further entrench his regime and apply more pressure on the remnants of the opposition. With the end of the war, Iran was keen to maintain the ceasefire so it became a less welcoming haven for Iraqi opposition.\textsuperscript{259} The loss of Iran as a base of operations was devastating for the already depleted Islamist insurgency in Iraq. The regime capitalized on this situation to crush the opposition’s strongholds in the marshes along the Iraq-Iran border. During the war, these regions had been extremely difficult to control. The terrain was almost impossible to navigate and because the marshes bordered Iran, insurgents could easily flee back and forth between the two countries. Moreover, they could count on a steady flow of supplies and manpower from Iran. The end of the war put an end to that situation. In August 1988, as the ceasefire was coming into effect, the Ba'athists seized the opportunity to reestablish their rule over the marshes.

The regime launched a major operation to “purify the marshes” beginning at 5:00 AM on August 8\textsuperscript{th} and ending “with the last light” on August 9\textsuperscript{th}. As the regime’s after-action report stated, “the operation took place under civilian leadership,” with the secretaries general of the Party Branches in operational control. The Party apparatuses were supported by major contingents from the security services, the police, the army, and the air force. The regime named

\textsuperscript{257} Special Controls on dealing with Ba‘thists who are from [Families] with Criminals from Elements of Hostile Parties,” \textit{BRCC}, 2135_0004 (0304) October 13, 1987.

\textsuperscript{258} Faust, 565-6.

\textsuperscript{259} Ofra Bengio, “Iraq,” in Ami Ayalon, and Haim Shaked, eds., \textit{Middle East Contemporary Survey, 12, 1988}, 520.
the operation, “Exploitation of Victory” (*istithmar al-nasr*), as it was meant to capitalize on Iraq’s supposed victory in the Iran-Iraq War. The reports on the operation claimed that it was “successful” not only in achieving “direct results” but also in providing “the required deterrence.” Thus, the regime’s intention was not merely to kill or capture insurgents and fugitives, it wanted to wreak havoc on the entire population. In carrying out collective punishment, Saddam hoped to dissuade the residents of the marshes from ever allowing their region to be used as a safe haven again. As such, the regime acted in a particularly ruthless manner. In addition to arresting 43 deserters and 170 suspects, those carrying out the operation also “burned and destroyed” 378 houses, 45 huts, and 516 boats; killed 67 deserters; burned two piles of munitions, one motorcycle, 32 piles of metal and 3 barrels of oil; seized huge amounts of ammunition, a car and a few motorcycles; destroyed 4 water pumps, one plow, one store of wheat and so on and so on…

Such operations in the marshes coincided with mass arrests in other Shi‘i areas of Iraq. Iraqis have told of dozens of families being uprooted and either imprisoned or exiled to Iran. A Shi‘i scholar, Amir Ali Yasin al-Tamimi, recalled that everyone in his town – including himself – who had a fugitive in their family were rounded up on August 18th, 1988. A total of 45 families in his town were arrested with him, his mother, and his sisters. The following February, after months of torture, they were all sent to Iran and told they would be executed if they returned.

**Results from a Decade of Oppression**

The regime’s overt violence was part of a larger and ultimately unachievable strategy of completely eliminating Islamists, and indeed all independent political influences from Iraqi

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religious institutions. It wanted to extract Islamists from Iraqi religious life and in doing so, separate them from the general population. As one Iraqi counterinsurgency manual from the early 1980s stated, insurgents “live among the masses like fish in water, and when the two are separated, great harm is done to the insurgents.”

This was particularly important in Shi‘i regions. Though the Ba‘thists viewed the Da‘wa Party and other Islamists as Iranian agents, it also recognized that they had imbedded themselves in traditional Iraqi Shi‘i institutions. Yet, as discussed in previous chapters, the regime preferred to leave traditional religious institutions in place, but take control of them and use them to impose its rule. Nevertheless, this outcome was not always feasible. If Islamists influences could not be extracted from a religious institution, it was indeed eliminated. Through a combination of repressing Islamists and co-opting non-political Shi‘is, the Ba‘thists were able to close many of southern Iraq’s independent religious schools and the scholars who taught in them. For example, one 1988 report stated that “there were 19 religious school in Najaf and Karbala until the year 1985 and as a result of the continuous cultural indoctrination, the number of schools in Najaf was reduced to two and they disappeared altogether from Karbala.”

Moreover, the reports from this period were optimistic that the regime would eliminate or co-opt the remaining independent religious schools altogether in the near future.

Shi‘is who lived in southern Iraq during this period have generally confirmed the accuracy of these reports, as have independent investigations by the United Nations. One such investigation resulted in a 1992 report that argued: “The number of clergy at Najaf had been

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262 “Manual: Counterinsurgency Warfare,” CRRC, SH-IZAR-D-000-296, October 1983. Interestingly, the Iraqi security officers appear to have studied the guerrilla warfare theories of Mao Zedong, who famously likened insurgents to fish and society to water. However, instead of applying Mao’s theories to foment insurgency, they cunningly employed them to defeat it.

263 “Religious Schools,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0088-0090), March 9, 1988.

264 See for example: Abbas Kadhim’s discussion at the Imam Khoie Foundation in the United Kingdom. October, 12, 2012 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SMtA2i9fKU
reduced from eight or nine thousand twenty years ago to two thousand 10 years later and 800 before the uprisings in 1991.”

By design, those Shi‘i scholars who remained were much more likely to support or at least not openly oppose the Ba‘thist regime. In addition to such repression, the Ba‘thists promoted scholars loyal to Saddam and the Party. Thus, at the end of the 1980s, the Ba‘thists exercised considerable influence in the hawza, and were able to monitor its activities in a much more effective manner.

One can observe the regime’s successes in eradicating Islamist influences in its reports on the Muharram ceremonies. The regime’s policies toward these ceremonies during the late 1980s remained largely the same as they had been earlier in the decade. The Party and security services continued to closely monitor potentially hostile elements and prevented people from carrying out “practices that do not fit well with the development and advancement of our beloved Iraq.” Designated Ba‘thists also continued to hold “seminars” and worked to “culturally indoctrinate” the Party apparatuses as well as “the popular councils, the citizens, and the men of religion.” As they had done in the past, representatives from the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs met with Shi‘i men of religion prior to the events to discuss what was expected of them. Likewise, the regime maintained its focus on using “television and radio programs.” It did so “by choosing speakers from among the men of religion to explain the historical importance of this occasion and the role of shu‘ubiyya and the Persians in deviating from the truth as well as introducing practices that are not appropriate for Arabism and religion and that have no connection to history.” The only real change was – now that the war had ended – the regime wished to glorify its “victory” over the “Zionist Persian enemy” and emphasize that it was

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achieved “under the leadership of the Man of Peace, Descendent of (Imam) Husayn, Comrade, Struggler, Saddam Hussein (may God preserve him).”\textsuperscript{266}

The real difference between the Muharram ceremonies in the early 1980s and those in the latter years of the decade was not the regime’s approach to them or its policies; rather it was the success that the regime had in implementing its plans. For example, the tone of the reports from the early 1980s was one of concern. They expressed a fear that “[Islamist] elements which are vindictive toward the nation (\textit{umma}), especially the Persians, continue their efforts to distort Islam, the values of Arabism, and particular Arab characteristics…” and that these hostile elements were exploiting the ceremonies to sabotage the regime. Also, as mentioned in Chapter 3, the Party had been concerned that it needed to further clarify its position on religion to the people and to emphasize that the Ba'th Party would strengthen “the heritage of the Orient (\textit{mashriq}) for the Nation (\textit{umma})…”\textsuperscript{267}

Conversely, the tone of the 1989 reports was much more positive. There was much better cooperation between the Party and other official apparatuses, and potentially disruptive activities were limited. For example, the “condolence meetings” for men, which in the past had been exploited by the opposition, no longer took place. Likewise, the regime reduced the condolence meetings for women – which were much less dangerous – to a few cases for which it had given special permission. The regime was also successful in controlling the youth more generally, for example by preventing them from riding around on motorcycles. And, finally, while previously the Ba'ithists worried that they had not been able to successfully present the Ba’thist views on


\textsuperscript{267} “The Occasion of the 10th of Muharram,” \textit{BRCC}, 23-4-7 (0568-0569), November 22, 1983.
religion and Islam, by the end of the decade it felt that they were successful in doing so.\textsuperscript{268} It should come as no surprise, therefore, that others who have examined the Ba‘th Party’s files on the Muhharam ceremonies have noted that “the regime succeeded in keeping them under control …even benefiting from them at times,” and, moreover, “by 1989, the [hostile] practices had almost ceased completely.”\textsuperscript{269}

While the regime’s policies had larger repercussions in the Shi‘i areas of Iraq, it should be noted that they were not targeted solely at the Shi‘is. The regime worked to eliminate Islamists and other opposition movements from schools and religious institutions in Sunni areas as well. As members of the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood have reported, the leadership of the organization was forced out of Iraq. For the remainder of Saddam’s presidency, it would operate in exile, mostly in the United Kingdom. Those Brothers who remained in Iraq were forced to conceal their membership in the organization. By the end of the 1980s, the regime reports indicated that members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Iraq were driven underground and were weary even of using private telephones to call each other for fear of the regime’s security services.\textsuperscript{270} As in Shi‘i areas, the regime saw itself in a battle with the Sunni Islamists over the loyalty of the youth. Thus in addition to mosques, schools were an important area of conflict. One regime report from 1989 lists teachers who were to be removed from their positions. Sixty one teachers were listed, over half of which (34) were dismissed because they were members or sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.\textsuperscript{271}

The regime’s ability to eliminate, or at least drive underground, much of the Islamist opposition in Iraq was a pillar of its strategy for penetrating and transforming Iraq’s religious

\textsuperscript{269} Faust, 188.
\textsuperscript{271} “Answer,” \textit{BRCC}, 2687-0001 (0441-0444), December 5, 1989.
landscape. Pervious chapters have discussed Ba'hist attempts to coerce and co-opt religious leaders into supporting the regime. The reduced presence of Islamists diminished the competition that these newly co-opted scholars faced in Iraq’s religious sphere. Perhaps even more importantly, the removal of Islamists opened space for new religious actors, who, as Chapter 5 will detail, the regime spent much of the 1980s creating.
Chapter 5: Addressing the Limits of Coercion and Co-optation

By the mid-1980s, it became clear to the Ba’thist leadership that their policies of coercing and co-opting religious leaders resulted in two major problems. First, they simply did not have enough religious scholars to carry out their proposed strategy in the religious sphere. Second, the religious leaders who they had managed to coerce and co-opt were unreliable, and they often subtly resisted interpretations of Islam that the regime attempted to impose.

The strategy of regime encroachment on religious Iraqi religious life through coercion, co-optation, and elimination discussed thus far was fairly successful in limiting who could act as a religious leader in Iraq. This success, however, came with its own challenges – the most problematic being that there simply were not enough acceptable religious leaders to fill the necessary positions. Often the regime attempted to fill this void with secular Ba’thists who could speak intelligently about Islam. The Popular Islamic Conference Organization’s secretary general, Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma’ruf, has already been mentioned, but he was not alone. The regime’s files on Ba’thists who wrote about the Party’s relationship to Islam in the early 1980s show them to be secularly educated intellectuals who often specialized in Arab nationalism.\(^\text{272}\) Their views on religion mirrored the regime’s contorted view. Thus they spoke of religion being “dual natured.” In other words, it was both a powerful tool and potentially dangerous. For example, in a 1983 article titled “The Ba’thist View of Religion,” a pair of secular Ba’thist intellectuals explained that while the Ba‘th was not a religious party, it was a “movement inspired by Islam, its renewal and its revolution.” Yet, they continued, “the dual nature of religion and the sensitivity in dealing with it in Arab society, especially lately, has caused the

\(^{272}\) For an example of such a file, see: *BRCC*, 2225_0000, 1970s and 1980s.
problem of religion to be one of the most dangerous problems present in modern Arab society.”

Ba'thist intellectuals who wrote tracts such as this were useful to the regime, but only to a certain extent. On one hand, they provided the regime with carefully considered ideas on religion. Aware of both the benefits and pitfalls of mixing religion with politics, they skirted a fine line between the two. They portrayed the Ba‘th Party as a champion of Islam and the religious opposition as extremists. Yet, on the other hand, the influence of these intellectuals was limited. They taught at universities, attended seminars, and sometimes wrote in newspapers, but they did not lead prayers or give Friday sermons. They were not the custodians of the Islamic tradition, and thus lacked authority on religious matters.

In fact, in the early 1980s, there was a severe dearth of traditional religious leaders whom the regime trusted in Iraq. In the regime’s archives, for example, one finds requests to modify the increasingly strict restriction on who could become a religious leader because, as one letter to the regime read, “many of the mosques suffer from a lack of Imams.” Such requests were invariably denied, but they provided a clear indication of the Ba‘thist regime’s lack of confidence in much of Iraq’s religious landscape during the early years of Saddam’s presidency. As a result it was unable to populate religious institutions with its supporters or effectively propagate its message on religion to the Iraqi people en masse.

Further complicating matters for the Ba‘thists was that even the Islamic scholars who they were able to co-opt and coerce into assisting the regime had already developed their own views on religion. Their interpretations of Islam did not always coincide with the regime’s official narrative of Ba‘thist Islam. Unlike scholars who were openly hostile to the Ba‘thists, or

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274 “Modification,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0171), February 17, 1985.
who refused to cooperate, religious leaders and secular Islamic intellectuals who worked with the regime erected a façade of Ba’thism around a set of ideas which were sometimes counter the regime’s desires.

This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by the interaction between the regime and semi-co-opted elements religious landscape on the issue of sectarianism. Despite the Ba’thists’ effort to highlight their beliefs about Arabism and unity between Sunnis and Shi‘is, secular institutions controlled by the state were not the ideal setting to champion such ideas. Narratives of Sunnism, Shi‘ism, and sectarianism are closely tied to discourses on Islam. Therefore, the custodians of Islamic discourse (i.e. traditional religious scholars) could offer arguments that were much more authoritative than the propaganda of a secular regime. However, neither traditional Sunnis nor traditional Shi‘is favored the Ba‘thist intention to minimize the theological boundaries between sects. Doing so was a serious challenge to their creeds and to their truth claims.

Nevertheless, with the onset of the Iran-Iraq War, the regime desperately needed reputable Islamic scholars to counter Iran’s Islamically-themed propaganda. They actively sought the support of Iraq’s Sunni and Shi‘i Arabs as well as its Kurds. As outlined in earlier chapters, the Ba‘thists were especially keen to include prominent Shi‘i scholars, but had difficulty in doing so. Behind closed doors, Ba‘thist officials acknowledged that those Shi‘i scholars who were willing to assist the regime, such as ‘Ali Kashif al-Ghita’, were more symbolic than authoritative and thus not very effective.

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The real support for the regime’s attempts to appear Islamically legitimate came from Sunnis who despised Iran and often disliked Shi’ism in general. For example, the First and Second Popular Islamic Conferences in 1983 and 1985 would not have been possible without help from Ma’ruf al-Dawalibi, who represented the sectarian Sunni regime in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis ensured that attendees at the conferences included ardently anti-Shi’i delegates such as the director of the Deobandi Dar al-‘Ulam in Karachi. Indeed, militantly sectarian Sunnis in Pakistan would emerge as an important international ally for Saddam.

Likewise, the Iraqi religious leaders who openly cooperated with the regime were mostly Arab Sunnis. Many of them did not share Ba’thist views of Islam, but they were willing to help Saddam combat what they saw as a Shi’i threat emanating from Iran. Even Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma’ruf, who was probably the single most important Iraqi responsible for propagating regime sponsored Islamic discourse, held sectarian views that senior Ba’thists found very problematic. As an official representative of the regime, Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma’ruf was well aware of Saddam’s aversion to anti-Shi’i arguments. In public and at regime sponsored conferences, he normally adhered to Ba’thist stipulations about the legitimacy of Shi’ism. For example, in seminars discussing Khomeini’s theory of Islamic Government, he claimed that Khomeini’s ideas were “offensive to the Shi’is, to the Sunnis, and to all Muslims.”

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277 See, Waqa’i’ al-Mu’tamar al-Islami al-Sha’bi.
279 Hassan Abbas, “Pakistan,” 166. It should also be noted that with the exception of Iraqis, Pakistanis made up the single largest delegation at the second Popular Islamic Conference. See: Waqa’i’ al-Mu’tamar al-Islami al-Sha’bi al-Thani.
Nevertheless, Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma’ruf secretly despised Shi‘ism and he wrote a number of polemical attacks against Shi‘is under the pen name, Muhammad Bundari.\textsuperscript{282} His resort to a pen name highlights two important points. First, it demonstrates that the regime did not support the propagation of anti-Shi‘i views. Hence, Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma’ruf could not publish such arguments under his real name. Second, it shows that support for the regime did not necessarily translate into complete support for its view on Islam. This latter point is relevant because while Sunni scholars associated with the regime were careful to pay lip service to official Ba‘thist discourse, they sometimes found subtle means to express their true views. For example, books published by Sunni scholars on behalf of the regime in the 1980s sometimes highlighted the fact that Khomeini viewed the Caliphs Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthman as sinners who had gone against explicit verses of the Qur’an and usurped power.\textsuperscript{283} These views were not unique to Khomeini, however. They are mainstream Twelver Shi‘i beliefs. Some sectarian Sunni scholars who worked for the regime and therefore could not express their sectarian views publically, employed this type of argument as a coded critique of Shi‘ism. In doing so they demonstrated that they did not always adhere to the regime’s official ideological prescriptions.

Upon close examination, it is possible to detect these tensions in the way that sectarian Sunni scholars negotiated the fine line between their sectarian beliefs and the discourses that were acceptable to the Ba‘thist leadership. At times they would overstep the regime imposed boundaries, but then quickly realize their mistake and retreat back into a safer discourse. For example, the University of Baghdad’s College of Shari‘a hosted a conference on “Religious Extremism” (\textit{Tatarruf al-Din}) in 1986. The dean of the college opened the conference by making

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma’ruf, Interview by author. Amman, Jordan. July 11, 2011.]
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clear that the discussion would focus on Khomeini’s followers as religious extremists who threatened the unity of the nation (*umma*).\(^{284}\) The speakers then attempted to tie Khomeini’s ideas to “fringe” (and in the eyes of the Ba’thists, illegitimate) movements throughout Islamic history.\(^{285}\)

However, Rushdi Muhammad, who was a professor of religion in the faculty of Shari’a, took his argument one step further. Citing a more stringent stream of classical Sunni scholars, such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya, he condemned the “Persians” for their tendency to form secretive organizations. He then criticized all political organizations based on the idea of the Imamate as an “inherited spiritual authority.”\(^{286}\) This was not simply a critique of Iranians. The essence of Shi’ism is belief in the Imamate as an “inherited spiritual authority.” Elsewhere in his remarks, his anti-Shi’i sentiments were laid bare. He traced the ideal of religious extremism back to those who opposed the early caliphs, explicitly singling out the Kharijites and the Shi’is.

Nevertheless, he appears to have understood that he crossed a regime imposed red line. He then quickly mentioned something which he termed “Arab Shi’ism.” He presented this brand of Shi’ism as legitimate and distinguished it from other forms of (presumably) Persian Shi’ism by stating that Arab Shi’is were intensely criticized by “foreign elements.”\(^{287}\) Yet he never explained what the Arab Shi’is believed, or how they differed from other Shi’is in their opposition to the early caliphs. Most likely, his remarks were simply an attempt to appease the Ba’thists and thus to avoid attracting unwanted attention from enforcers of regime ideology. Again, this episode highlights the problems of a strategy consisting of co-opting and coercing

\(^{284}\) *Tatarruf al-Din* (Baghdad, College of Shari’a, the University of Baghdad, March 31, 1986), 7.
\(^{285}\) For example, see: *Tatarruf al-Din*, 17-24.
\(^{286}\) *Tatarruf al-Din*, 58.
\(^{287}\) *Tatarruf al-Din*, 54-7.
religious leaders. These religious leaders had their own motivations for supporting the regime, and at times they could be counter-productive. In this case, religious leaders who were supposed to promote a Ba’thist Islam which would unite the Iraqi people against the Iranian enemy, were instead fomenting sectarianism which threatened to divide the country and push its Shi’i majority into the welcoming hands of Iranian Ayatollahs.

High-ranking regime officials were aware of this problem. In one 1988 report, the Director of Iraqi Intelligence (\textit{al-mukhabarat}) was particularly concerned about ensuring the “good intentions” of “some of the more zealous among our friends (among academics and men of religion)\textsuperscript{288} with respect to Khomeinism as a sectarian, political phenomenon, and to Shi’ism as a legal school within the domain of the Islamic Shari’a.”\textsuperscript{289} Yet, the regime had little recourse. It did not have alternative religious leaders who could speak authoritatively about Islam.

\textbf{Creating Religious Leaders}

At first, Saddam responded to the lack of acceptable religious leadership by proposing that Ba’th Party members, who were committed to the Party’s ideology, could fill these positions in religious institutions. In September 1984, he issued a presidential decree stating: “Party comrades who wish to become men of religion will be chosen with the proper specifications and competencies to perform the mission of influencing the minds of the citizens. This is a Party duty and the responsibility for it lies with the Party.”\textsuperscript{290} The regime sent appeals to each province, requesting the Party bureaus (\textit{tanzimat}) to nominate “competent” Ba’thists who desired to take part in this “mission.” The bureaus were to submit lists containing each candidate’s name, party rank, birthday, profession, and the name of the departments in which he has worked. Then they

\textsuperscript{288} Parentheses are original.
\textsuperscript{289} “Islamic College of the University,” \textit{BRCC}, 029-1-6 (0083-0085), June 30, 1988.
\textsuperscript{290} “Decision,” \textit{BRCC}, 046-3-6 (0613), September 9, 1984.
were to have the candidates report to the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs for training beginning on December 2, 1984.291

However, the Ba‘thist rank and file consisted mostly of secular nationalists who were not interested in becoming religious scholars. The responses to this request, therefore, were nowhere near adequate. Some offices wrote back simply stating: “We wish to inform you that there are not any comrades in our bureaus that wish to work as men of religion.”292 Of the regions that did produce volunteers, the numbers were not inspiring. The entire Central Region of Iraq only produced three volunteers: two from the province of al-Anbar and one from Diyala. Salah al-Din, Saddam’s home province, did not produce any volunteers.293 Moreover, the caliber of the Ba‘thists who did volunteer was not high. None of those listed possessed a background in Islamic studies. Many were teachers, some were in the military, and some had random backgrounds such as one “agricultural engineer.”294

By the middle of the 1980s, the regime responded to these setbacks by deciding to add another layer to its strategy. In addition to co-opting and coercing religious leaders or having Ba‘thists attempt to fill the gaps, the regime would begin to create its own traditionally trained religious scholars. In doing so, it could address two problems at once. On one hand, it could increase the number of loyal scholars to work in mosques and various religious institutions. On the other hand, the regime could fully indoctrinate these budding religious leaders with Ba‘thist ideology on Islam and weed out those who had other agendas.

The regime had inherited a few institutions, such as the College of Shari‘a and Fiqh at the University of Baghdad, and it worked to bring them under its total control. The Party created

292 “Nomination,” BRCC, 046-3-6 (0582), December 31, 1984.
293 “Nominating Men of Religion,” BRCC, 046-3-6 (0590), November 15, 1984.
294 See, for example: “Comrades who wish to work as Men of Religion,” BRCC, 046-3-6 (0603).
committees to regulate who was accepted to these institutions.295 In doing so, the regime ensured that its graduates who worked in the religious sphere could be trusted. Yet, these existing institutions could not produce enough new scholars to fill the void left by the regime’s restrictive policies.

In 1985, the regime tried a different, eventually more successful, approach. It decided to begin producing its own religious scholars from scratch. The first step was the creation of the “Institute for the Preparation of Imams and Sermon-Givers” which would supplement the existing religious schools. In addition to producing a higher number of acceptable religious leaders, this new institute would also allow for even stricter control over the students. The regime created a separate, more rigid acceptance procedure that was handled on the ministerial level and coordinated by the Ba'th Party. Thus, this process was administered by officials who were higher ranking than those who handled admissions at other universities and institutes. The regime implemented these additional restrictions, its documents reveal, “to ensure the desire of the student and his loyalty to the revolution…”296 In 1986, the institute began accepting applications for what would later become known as the Saddam Institute for Imams and Sermon-Givers. Both of the applicant’s parents were required to be Iraqi (mainly to prevent students of Iranian ancestry) and to undergo an extensive background investigation. Further, the students needed to be graduates from a state high school or an official Islamic institute. This ensured that the regime knew what the students had been taught. No one who had received an education independent of its control could enter the institute.297

In 1988, the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Abdullah Fadil, put forward an even more ambitious plan. He hoped to create a world-class Islamic university in Baghdad.

The minister stated that the idea of an Islamic university initially came from the executive committee of the Popular Islamic Conference Organization as well as many of “our friends” who conduct Islamic work to counter Khomeini. These friends were almost certainly wealthy Gulf Arabs and he affirmed that they had already pledged to support the project financially.

The minister believed that the new Islamic university would be “very useful” as it would “support the political, creedal, and educational goals […] of the Mujahid President Leader, Saddam Hussein, for creating a [proper] understanding of Islam and thwarting the propaganda of Khomeini…” It could help to ameliorate both problems that the regime faced in its attempts to create a religious landscape capable of promoting its strategic goals. With regard to the lack of acceptable scholars, the new university would “create an Islamic leadership both inside and outside Iraq that will spread the proper Islamic understanding of the Arab spirit of Islam.” Despite funding from Gulf Arabs, the minister also felt that the regime could maintain tight controls over the university’s curriculum. Thus, the “young active leadership” produced by the university would “agree with the ideas of the President Leader (may God Preserve him).” This cadre of Islamic leaders would fight “sectarianism, theological particularism, and hakimiyya ( politicization of religion)” that in the near and distant future will threaten the powerful foundations of our intellectual work in the domain of Islam.” Thus, the minister believed the university could create a cadre of loyal religious leaders who would be a powerful instrument in fighting sectarianism and the Islamist opposition, while at the same time promoting Ba’thism, and legitimizing the rule of Saddam. The minister presented his plan to the presidential office,

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298 These parentheses are in original Arabic document. Thus the document defines “hakimiyya” as the “ politicization of religion.” Hakimiyya simply means sovereignty. The Egyptian Muslim Brother, Sayyid Qutb – following the work of the Pakistani intellectual, Abul Ala Mawdudi – made the term popular in Islamist discourse by claiming that God was the only sovereign. Therefore, any form of government other than theocracy inherently usurped God’s sovereignty. Further, those who claimed sovereignty for someone or something other than God were assigning a divine attribute to that person or system. Belief in the legitimacy of forms of government other than theocracy was, therefore, equivalent to polytheism.

299 “Islamic College of the University,” BRCC, 029-1-6 (0088-0089), June 30, 1988.
which in turn requested assessments from the Iraqi Intelligence Service (jihaz al-mukhabarat) and the Ba‘th Party’s Secretariat.

The Director of the Iraqi Intelligence Service and the Director General of the Office of the Party Secretariat responded with lengthy reports. Both reports recommended moving forward with the project, but because they understood that the regime’s efforts in the religious sphere were often subtly undermined by Islamic scholars who did not wholly accept Ba‘thist ideology, they emphasized the need to have the university conform to “the views of the Party and the revolution in interacting with religion.” In addition to fears about sectarianism, the Office of the Secretariat wished to counter critiques of Arab nationalism and socialism which were sometimes voiced by religious leaders. Islamists in particular often described these pillars of Ba‘thism as foreign imports, labeling them reprehensible innovations (bida‘). Thus, the Secretariat’s report asserted that the university should “emphasize that the Arab-Islamic civilization is a humanistic civilization that interacts with other world civilizations in a positive way.” The Director of the Intelligence Service also cautioned against Islamist views, arguing that it was necessary for any cultural project in Iraq to be conducted “in the general framework and for the purposes of developing nationalism (qawmiyya) and to interact positively with the general politics of the state.”

Yet, the regime hoped to isolate more than just Islamist and sectarian views. It wished to eliminate all foreign and independent influences. Both reports expressed wariness about the idea of outside funding. The Director of the Intelligence Service argued that when accepting foreign funding, it was also imperative to: 1) “Strengthen education policies in a framework defined by the documents of the Party and the revolution,” 2) “Avoid the imposition of conditions by foreign organizations that offer funding,” and 3) Ensure that Iraqis are in charge of the budget
and administrative matters. The Office of the Secretariat echoed this view, cautioning that financial support coming from abroad must “not be bound by any conditions and that it have no influence over educational policy.”

To ensure that the graduates of the university would fully adopt the regime’s ideology, both reports also discussed in detail the methods of controlling students. Most importantly, the regime needed to manage the “conditions of acceptance and define the preparation of the students.” The Office of the Secretariat suggested accepting young students who had not yet attended a university. They would be easier to mold, and thus the regime would have less difficulty “building the loyalty of these students to Iraq and the Arab nation [umma].” The reports also discuss the need to develop a plan to keep the students loyal to Saddam and tied to the regime after they graduated.

Finally, the Office of the Secretariat cautioned that it might be necessary to disassociate the university from the Popular Islamic Conference. To be most effective, the regime needed to “prevent any governmental status from being attributed” to the university. While this was officially the regime’s policy toward the Popular Islamic Conference as well, the Office of the Secretariat was concerned that it had become associated with the regime. Hence, the Party Secretariat argued that the Popular Islamic Conference should only be involved if it “does not carry any governmental status.”

Following the recommendations in these reports, the regime opened the university later that year under the name “Saddam University for Islamic Studies.” It closely managed who studied and worked at the university and it strictly controlled the curriculum. The regime once again turned to its leading official on Islamic issues, Bashshar ‘Awad Ma’ruf, who was named

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300 For the report from the Director of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, see: “Islamic College of the University,” BRCC, 029-1-6 (0078-0086), August 6, 1988; For the report from the Office of the Secretariat, see: “Islamic College of the University,” BRCC, 029-1-6 (0074-0077), August 11, 1988.
the university’s first president. Although he was also PICO’s Secretary General, the regime was careful not to associate the new university with the Popular Islamic Conference. And despite Saddam’s name in its title, the regime asserted that the university was independent.

The system of control that the university implemented was mirrored by the Saddam Institute for the Preparation of Imams and Sermon-Givers. They both focused on ensuring that all students and staff were loyal to the regime and possessed the correct political orientation. Saddam had originally hoped to limit acceptances to the university and the institute to Ba’thists, but this policy was impossible to implement because too few Ba’thists applied. He eventually acquiesced, ordering the institute and university to accept the Ba’thists first and then “clean students.”

Therefore, the regime only considered applications from students and staff who came from acceptable backgrounds. Their political tendencies were listed either as Ba’thists, supporters of the Party, or independents with no derogatory information against them. No supporters of any other political movement were considered. Additionally, the applicants could not have familial ties with opposition political parties and very few of them had any relatives living abroad.

Every potential student or employee was required to complete a form detailing his education, party affiliation, relatives, military service, whether he had been in prison, etc. One question asked, “Do you have relatives up to the fourth degree who have previously been convicted of involvement in political parties?” Others inquired, “Do you have relatives who live outside the country? Who are they and what are the reasons that they live there? What are their

302 See, for example, the forms: BRCC, 2868_0000 (0022-0042).

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addresses and employment? Was their exit from Iraq legal?” If the university wished to accept a student or offer a staff position, it would forward this information to the Party Secretariat. The Secretariat would then send it to local Party branches responsible for the geographic areas in which the applicant had lived or worked. The branches would conduct an investigation. They filled out another, more detailed form on each applicant. These again dealt mostly with the applicant’s political tendencies and participation in the Ba‘th Party. They also discussed his level of studies and the political orientations of his family and friends. These forms were sent back to the Party Secretariat, which would make a determination about the applicant’s acceptability. It would then inform the university.304

Because the university understood that only politically acceptable students and staff would be approved, it only considered applicants who met the regime’s criteria. Thus the Party approved the vast majority of applications it received. However, the applicants also understood that there was a political test involved. Sometimes, if applicants did not meet the regime’s expectations, they would lie. In doing so, they could make it past the university’s initial check, but the Party would normally reject them.

For example, one man applied for a minor staff position at the university. He met all of the professional qualifications for the job and the university wanted to hire him. He filled out the form on his family’s background and political orientations. He listed himself as a Ba‘thist with the Party rank of Advanced Supporter. The university was pleased and sent a memo to the Party Secretariat stating that it had a vacant position and wished to nominate this man to fill it. The university listed his qualifications and attached the form with his information. The Party Secretariat located his local branch, and forwarded the package to it. After conducting an

303 For examples, see: “Information Form for Advanced Students of High Studies and Masters Degrees,” BRCC, 2868_0000 (0018-0020).
304 For example of this type of form, see: BRCC, 2868_0000 (0016-0020).
investigation, the branch sent the results back to the Secretariat. Not only was the man not a Ba'thist, he had also “refused to volunteer” for one of the regime’s pet projects. This Orwellian terminology – implying that volunteering was not voluntary and someone could, therefore, “refuse to volunteer” – says a good deal about the nature of the regime. The Secretariat wrote to the university, rejecting the application. It did not give a reason. It simply stated that “we do not support” his nomination.305

As will be shown in the following chapters, the creation of a system of control in the Saddam University for Islamic Studies and other similar institutions became the foundation of what Saddam would term the Faith Campaign of the 1990s and early 2000s. In fact, these institutions were the culmination of a much larger process that Saddam had begun in the late 1970s. The first decade of Saddam’s presidency had been marked by the ever-deepening encroachment of the Ba'thist regime into all spheres of Iraqi society. The religious sphere was no exception. However, the “dual nature” of religion, as discussed above, offered both unique challenges and unique opportunities. Accordingly, upon his assumption of the presidency, Saddam set out both to neutralize the dangers posed by religion and to exploit its potential benefits. Interestingly, he did not attempt this, as many have assumed, by modifying his own view of religion or Islam. Instead, he worked diligently to impose his Ba'thist ideas of religion onto Iraq’s religious landscape and attempted to eliminate all who opposed that process. The ends of this strategy were clear (regime control of religious discourse in Iraq), yet the means to achieve it were not always as effective as the regime would have liked. Coercion and co-optation failed to produce a religious landscape capable of meeting the regime’s intentions, so in the mid-1980s it added a policy of creating religious scholars. As later chapters will demonstrate, the combination of the coercion, co-optation, and creation of Islamic leaders succeeded to a much

305 This case can be found in: BRCC, 3246-0000 (0118-0126), 2002.
greater degree than has been acknowledged in the literature on Iraq. Consequently, Saddam was able to employ religion very effectively during the 1990-1 Gulf Crisis and throughout the final decade of his rule.
Part II: The Gulf War and its Aftermath 1990-1993
Chapter 6: Continuity and Change in the Gulf War

On August 2, 1990, Saddam sent shockwaves throughout the international political system by invading his oil rich neighbor to the south – Kuwait. The crisis alarmed other Gulf Arab monarchies, who feared they could be Saddam’s next targets. Saudi Arabia hastily requested military support from its longtime ally, the United States. On August 10th, and then on September 5th, Saddam again raised eyebrows in the West by delivering what became known as his first and second “jihad speeches.” Western observers in the media and in academia interpreted these speeches as a major ideological shift for Saddam’s regime. Saddam continued to make such gestures in the coming months, culminating in January 1991 with his placement of the words “God is Great” on the Iraqi flag. Many outside observers interpreted these actions as a sign that the once militantly secular president of Iraq was now calling for holy war. Yet, this chapter will demonstrate that these claims have been overstated. Neither the so-called jihad speeches, nor Saddam’s other Islamized rhetoric during the 1990-1 conflict represented an abrupt ideological shift. Rather, they were a natural continuation of his regime’s rhetoric and of decades-old Ba’thist thinking. However, this does not negate the fact that certain developments occurred in Ba’thist methods of instrumentalizing religion. Yet, as this chapter will also show, these developments were not ideological in nature. They are better understood as a corollary to the regime’s project to bring the Iraqi religious landscape under its control. Thus, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, the regime’s increasing comfort in ability to effectively instrumentalize Islam in its strategic messaging during the war resulted from the expanding control that the regime exercised over religion in Iraq.
Content of Saddam’s Islamic Rhetoric

In the so-called jihad speeches of August and September 1990, Saddam indeed employed religious rhetoric. Addressing the Arabs in the first speech, he declared, “your nation is a great nation. God chose it to be the nation of the Qur’an. After choosing it throughout the various stages of history, he honored it with the task of upholding the principles of all the divine missions and being the preacher and keeper of the principles, values and wisdom contained in them.” He then implored Arabs and Muslims to rise up in the name of Islam against the evil infidel armies that threatened Iraq.\(^{306}\) He continued this line of argument again in his second speech on September 5\(^{th}\): “It is your turn, O Arabs, to save the entire human race, not only yourselves. Your turn has come to show your values and to highlight the meanings of the message of Islam in which you believe and which you practice.”\(^{307}\)

These speeches took much of the world by surprise. Western observers had been accustomed to viewing Ba‘thist Iraq as a secular bulwark against Iran’s Islamists regime. They were amazed to hear all this talk of God and holy war. An op-ed in the Times of London on August 14, 1990 typified this reaction. It argued that Saddam “rose to power as a Ba‘thist: that is, a member of a secular, modernising socialist movement within the Arab world.” However, something dramatic and unexpected had suddenly occurred: “The crisis in the Middle East did not start out as a holy war; far from it,” the op-ed argued, yet, “Holy war came to the Gulf last Friday,” on August 10\(^{th}\), with Saddam’s first jihad speech. The author of the op-ed found Saddam’s religious rhetoric highly unusual. After all, he maintained that, “During the Iran-Iraq War, [Saddam] was the object of the kind of rhetoric he is now hurling at King Fahd [of Saudi


\(^{307}\) A full text of this speech can be found in: Saddam Husayn, “Call For Jihad, 5 Sep 1990” in Ofra Bengio, ed., *Saddam Speaks on the Gulf Crisis: A Collection of Documents* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University), 136-143.
Arabia]. Until fairly recently, his appeal was based mainly on ‘the Arab nation’, rather than on Islam.”\textsuperscript{308} Other Western media outlets ran similar analyses. An article in the Washington Post carried the headline: “Once-Secularist Saddam Discovers Benefits of Moslem Piety”\textsuperscript{309} and newspapers ranging from The New York Times to The Guardian argued that until the Gulf Crisis, Saddam had been the leader of a “proudly secular government” but that he had suddenly turned to Islamic radicalism.\textsuperscript{310}

Academic treatments of the Gulf War also tended to adopt this narrative. Thus, the historiography of Iraq, often depicts the crisis as a major turning point with regard to Saddam’s view of Islam. Amatzia Baram, James Piscatori, and Jerry Long all see the conflict as ideologically significant for Saddam. Piscatori’s edited volume, \textit{Islamic Fundamentalisms and the Gulf Crisis}, brought together a number of prominent scholars to examine how Saddam employed (unprecedented) religious rhetoric to reach out to Islamists.\textsuperscript{311} Similarly, Long argues that “Saddam found religion” around the time of the Gulf Crisis and that the jihad speeches of August 10\textsuperscript{th} and September 5\textsuperscript{th} were a critical turning point. In those speeches, Long asserts, “Saddam continually connected Islam and Arabism,” and as evidence that this rhetoric was new, he points to Saddam’s call to “defend Mecca.” In dissecting such language, Long insists that “Saddam never mentioned Mecca prior to his speech on 10 August.”\textsuperscript{312}

\textsuperscript{311} See for example, Amatzia Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism; And, James Piscatori, ed. \textit{Islamic Fundamentalisms and the Gulf Crisis} (Chicago: American Academy of Arts and Sciences with the Fundamentalism Project, 1991).
\textsuperscript{312} Long, 53, 94-5, 97.
There are two problems with this type of analysis. First, it misinterprets and overstates Saddam’s language in these speeches; second, and related, this was not the first time Saddam had used such language. Often, misinterpretations of Ba’thist rhetoric during this period stem from a discourse which draws a clear line between secular Arab nationalism and Islam. As has been discussed in previous chapters, Saddam would never have accepted such a distinction. He saw Islamic and Arab history as intertwined. Islam, in his view, was the religion of the Arabs. The people and the religion could not be separated. In that sense, the jihad speeches and Saddam’s rhetoric during the crisis reflected the same official position on Islam that his regime had articulated since at least the 1970s, and probably earlier. For example in the jihad speeches, despite all the discussion of God and holy war, Saddam is clearly addressing the Arabs. He begins his statements with “O Arabs.” The Arabs he argues are the “nation of the Qur’an” and have been “chosen” by God. Saddam calls on the Arabs to live up to “the meanings of the message of Islam in which you believe and which you practice.” It was in this sense that he invoked Islam – as the religion of the Arab people, not as an independent or primary identity. When he did mention Muslims, it almost always followed his call to Arabs. Similarly, he viewed Mecca as a great and holy city at the center of Arab-Islamic history; not simply as a religious symbol divorced from Arabism. As such, Long’s assertion that Saddam had never mentioned the city until August 10, 1990 is incorrect. During the Iran-Iraq War official Iraqi propaganda denounced “the leader in Tehran” for the “abuse of holy symbols in Holy Mecca…”313 During the Gulf Crisis, instead of attacking Khomeini, Iraqi propaganda denounced the Saudis and Americans for their abuse of the city. Very little had changed in this accusation, except, of course, the perpetrator of Mecca’s abuse. Not all of Saddam’s militantly religious rhetoric can be attributed to a conflation of Islam and Arabism, but this more ardent Islamic rhetoric was not

new. For example, ten years earlier, in 1981, when most of these analyses depict Saddam as a staunch secularist, he addressed a group of foreign ministers from Muslim states at a summit in Baghdad. On the issue of Palestine, Saddam exclaimed: “The first Muslims had fought under the leadership of our Great Prophet (Peace be upon Him), and after him under his Caliphs and his companions, against aggressive and corrupt empires.” He then continued, “As the descendants of those great men, believing in the glorious message of Islam (risala al-Islam), today we shoulder the responsibility of jihad for those principles.” Thus, jihad and religious militancy were not new for Saddam. There was no substantive difference between such statements from the early years of Saddam’s presidency and his most aggressive religious rhetoric during the Gulf War.

Other academic approaches have employed more nuanced arguments in an attempt to show that Saddam had abandoned his Ba’thist views in favor of a religious ideology. Contending that Saddam was embracing Islamism during the 1990-1991 conflict, Amatzia Baram presents Saddam as an Islamic reformer, who endeavored to restore the religion to its pristine, early state. As evidence, he quotes Saddam lamenting that “Islam … has been transformed into a state of routine and bureaucracy, practiced by the majority according to the technical device of the minority.” Similarly, Baram highlights Saddam’s argument that “Religious guidance had been ‘stripped of the … basic spirit.’” Baram then shows that “Saddam insisted, the true spirit of Islam would return, and Iraq would lead this spiritual revival.” Furthermore, according to Baram,

314 For some reason the English version of this communique renders the Arabic al-Islam as “the Quran.” It should also be noted that the term risala (message) is a ubiquitous term in Ba’thist idiom. As this example shows, even in the early years of his presidency, Saddam used it to describe a message that was inexorably tied to the religion of Islam. See Chapter 12 for a more extensive discussion of this and similar terms.
315 “Final Communique,” Twelfth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, Baghdad, Republic of Iraq, 1-5 June, 1981. This document can be found in the archives of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which has since changed its name to “Organization of Islamic Cooperation”; The archives are available online at: <http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv2/home/> This communique can be found at: <http://www.oic-oci.org/arabic/conf/fm/12/12-icfm-fc-ar.htm>
Saddam’s preferred “way to revive Islam was to return to the Qur’an and the Sunna – ‘the action of the Prophet Muhammad.’” Baram uses these statements to argue that Saddam was “following in the footsteps” of Islamic thinkers such as Hassan al-Banna, who founded the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, because both Saddam and al-Banna relied on the Prophet Muhammad and the founding period of Islam “rather than on later jurisprudence.” Baram also suggests that Saddam may have been inspired by the even more radical Islamist, Sayyid Qutb.  

Yet this is a fundamental misreading of the relationship between Arab nationalism, Islam, and Islamism in the 20th century as well as of the intellectual history of Ba‘thism. Considering that the Muslim Brotherhood was illegal in Iraq and the works of al-Banna and Qutb remained banned until the end of Saddam’s presidency, it is unlikely that Saddam wished to propagate their ideas. Moreover, Saddam did not need to look to Islamists such as al-Banna and Qutb for the ideas that Baram showcases. A more obvious source for Saddam’s views was the Ba‘th Party’s founder Michel Aflaq – whom Saddam himself claimed was the inspiration for his ideas. Like other Arab nationalists of the mid-20th century, Aflaq claimed that Islam had been corrupted. Therefore, he called for a “reform” (islah) of Islam based on a return to the Prophet Muhammad’s example and to a proper understanding of the earliest Islamic sources. In the 1940s and 1950s, Aflaq insisted, “all the influence that Islam imparted on civilizations after its conquests is from the seeds planted in its first twenty years,” but that memories of this period “had atrophied among the Arabs after hundreds of years.” Thus, in the modern period, people “read the Prophet’s biography, and sang about him, but did not understand him.” As Saddam would do in the quotes that Baram highlights, Aflaq bemoaned this state of affairs and drew

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attention to “the contradiction between our great past and our disgraceful (al-ma‘ib) present.”

Hence, what Aflaq described as “the problem” was not Islam but “the separation between true religion and the [present] manifestation of religion.” In fact, in Aflaq’s estimation, this separation led to manifestations of religion that “contradict” the true religion. Accordingly, Aflaq’s solution was not to do away with religion, but to reform it by returning it to its original state. The Ba‘thist revolution, Aflaq argued, “carries the seeds” of this “reform.” Therefore, Aflaq maintained that Ba‘thism was a “return to a clear and sound religion which is completely applicable to its original goals.” As such, Aflaq claimed to rely on the earliest sources like the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet, rather than on later jurisprudence. Nevertheless, Aflaq was a severe critic of Islamism and an opponent of Islamists such as al-Banna and Qutb. Nothing that Saddam said during the Gulf War differed significantly from these ideas that Aflaq had espoused in the mid-20th century and nothing in them suggests an affinity for Islamism.

Baram is on firmer ground when he highlights that during the 1990-1991 conflict, Saddam connected his cult of personality to divinely inspired supernatural occurrences, and even claimed that he received guidance directly from God. Baram quotes Saddam’s statement: “it was God who showed us [read: me] the path. Our brain was worthless in this matter: it was God who guided us … God has blessed us.” Yet, as will be shown below, this was not the first time that Saddam’s cult of personality had veered into divinely inspired supernatural claims. And he certainly was not the first non-Islamist leader to claim that he received direct divine guidance. It is difficult to think of many 20th century Middle Eastern leaders less Islamist than the Iranian

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319 Michel Aflaq, “Nazratuna lil-Din,” 122.
320 Michel Aflaq, “Nazratuna lil-Din,” 128. Baram never fully discusses these aspects of Aflaq thought and instead he portrays Aflaq as an atheist. Yet, when Saddam repeats the same ideas about the return to a true religion, Baram insists that he was becoming Islamist. For more on this topic, see Chapter 12.
321 Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, 214.
Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. Yet, the Shah used to discuss how Shi‘i Imams appeared to him: “From the time I was six or seven, I have felt that perhaps there is a supreme being who is guiding me … I am convinced that I have been able to accomplish things which, unaided by some unseen hand, I could never have done.” He stated that God “had ordained me to do certain things for the service of my nation.” And that “I consider myself an agent of the will of God.”

When one considers that during the 1990s, Saddam also compared himself to a pre-Islamic pagan god from the Epic of Gilgamesh, it becomes clear that Saddam’s statements about divine inspiration should be attributed to the delusions of megalomania, rather than indications of a turn to Islamism.

Thus, there was not much new in Saddam’s rhetoric – even during the so-called jihad speeches – and if there was something new, it was not Islamism. It is difficult to imagine that people like al-Banna and Qutb would have accepted Saddam’s claims of direct guidance from God as legitimate. As has been recounted in previous chapters, Ba‘thism had always exalted Islam and employed heavily religious symbolism. From its inception, Saddam’s regime strove to portray itself as Islamically legitimate. If there was a difference in Iraqi rhetoric during the Gulf War, it was not in the substance of its Islamic references, but in the ubiquitous manner that these references were employed. In other words, the substance of the regime’s view of Islam had remained largely the same, but Saddam now afforded this view a more central place in his public statements and propaganda.

As recounted in previous chapters, Saddam was against Islamism but he was a proud supporter of Islam as the religion of the Arabs as well as a crucial historical and cultural achievement for them. Nevertheless, when Saddam took power, the Ba‘thists had feared that

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making religion a central pillar of their rhetoric – and thereby inserting it into the political sphere – would empower the opposition and independent religious leaders. In 1977, Saddam had made clear, “our party does not take a neutral stance between faith and atheism; it is always on the side of faith.”

Yet, at the same time, he also expressed apprehension about this position. He worried that elements of the opposition had “begun using religion for political purposes,” and that therefore “It is incumbent … not to do the same and to avoid clashing with them directly and in a traditional manner.” At that time, Saddam feared that the religious opposition would twist the regime’s rhetoric on religion so as to undermine Ba‘thist rule. The Islamists, Saddam averred, “largely base their tactics on erroneous tactical measures we might take. They would broadcast our mistaken measures in a way that would reflect badly on our strategy.”

Furthermore, by turning the Ba‘thists religious rhetoric against the regime, the opposition could “create a psychological barrier between the Party and its ideology on one hand and certain sections of the population on the other.”

Thus, although Saddam had insisted that his Party had a clear position on religion, he was concerned about promoting it too prominently without first controlling religious discourse in the country.

Previous chapters have outlined Saddam’s strategies throughout the 1980s to neutralize independent religious discourse in the country and thus marginalize anyone who, as he put it in 1977, used “religion as a cover for political activity or as a means of creating an atmosphere of contradiction and conflict between the [Ba‘thist] Revolution, its program, and its aims on the one hand, and religious practices on the other.” By 1990, the regime was fairly confident that it had succeeded. Accordingly, Saddam felt free to promote his views on religion more explicitly. It is important to note, therefore, that the Gulf Crisis does not represent a change in Saddam’s

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understanding of Ba‘thism. The important change – and this is one of the more insightful contributions of the Iraqi archive – is that Saddam now felt confident enough to express more openly and forcefully the positions to which he had been inclined since at least the 1970s.

**Instrumentalizing Islam in the Gulf Conflict**

Despite the reporting in Western media during the Gulf War, the Ba‘thists’ references to Islam were not sudden or unprecedented. Previous chapters have already recounted that as the regime gradually gained control over the Iraqi religious sphere, it slowly began to instrumentalize Islam. Co-opted religious leaders spoke out on behalf of the regime. New institutions such as the Popular Islamic Conference Organization produced a range of intellectual content which reinforced the Ba‘thist discourse on Islam. By the mid-to-late 1980s, the regime’s increasing dominion over religion in Iraq mirrored an even more overt instrumentalization of it.

Near the end of the Iran-Iraq War, as Ofra Bengio has argued, Saddam “doubled his efforts to harness religion to the cause of the war and to manipulate religion for political purposes.” For example, the operation to retake the al-Faw Peninsula was named operation “Blessed Ramadan,” and was retroactively dated to the first day of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.²²⁶ Perhaps most famously, the Anfal Campaign against the Kurds in the latter years of the Iran-Iraq War was named after the eighth Sura of the Qur’an, which describes a battle between early Muslims and pagans. This fit well into Ba‘thist interpretations of Islam because the Ba‘thists viewed the early Muslims as Arabs fighting for an Arab religion. Thus, if the modern Kurds apposed the Ba‘thist Arabs, they were the enemies of Arabs and of their religion, Islam. The Kurds were, therefore, the modern equivalent to the enemies of the early Muslims in

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the Qur’an. The regime also assigned Islamic names to its weaponry. In 1988, it began using its own version of the Scud-B missile which it named al-Husayn, after the Shi‘i Imam.\textsuperscript{327} This, of course, was also a \textit{double entendre}. “Husayn” referred both to the name of the Shi‘i Imam, and to Saddam himself. It therefore helped to link the Iraqi president to great Arab-Islamic heroes of the past. In fact, official Iraqi rhetoric often blurred the line between them. In some cases Iraqi propaganda even began to attribute supernatural powers to, or even to partly deify Saddam. In May 1988, one Iraqi newspaper reported that an Iranian bombardment had destroyed all the buildings in a particular area. Only walls bearing a picture of Saddam remained standing.\textsuperscript{328}

Although these were not the first incidents in which Saddam had employed such symbols, these examples highlight how Islam became increasingly prominent as Saddam regime penetrated into Iraq’s religious sphere. As the Ba‘thists co-opted, controlled, and filled many positions of religious leadership in the country, Saddam began to employ these religious leaders more actively in his political strategies. This control, and the parallel instrumentalization of religion continued steadily in the two years between the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the beginning of the Gulf Crisis.

The Western press may have been surprised by Saddam’s Islamized rhetoric during the Gulf Crisis, but an analysis of Iraq’s Arabic media prior to crisis clearly demonstrates what was coming. The \textit{hajj} season prior to the conflict (in June 1990) was a case in point. By that time, relations between the Iraqi regime and the Gulf Arab monarchies had already become tense. Saddam attempted to utilize the Islamic institutions and networks that he had built during the 1980s to claim the mantle of Islamic legitimacy. For example, on June 27\textsuperscript{th}, Iraq’s main daily, \textit{al-Jumhuriyya}, dedicated its front page to promoting Iraq’s position vis-à-vis the Gulf Arabs. In this

\textsuperscript{327} Long, 70-1.
\textsuperscript{328} Ofra Bengio, “Iraq,” in Ami Ayalon, and Haim Shaked eds., \textit{Middle East Contemporary Survey}, Vol. 12, 1988, 519.
section, the editors included a headline and a brief article about a meeting during the *hajj* between the Saudi-based president of the Popular Islamic Conference Organization and Abdullah Fadil, the Iraqi Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs. The two Islamic leaders praised Iraq for its support of Islamic activism, and thus portrayed Saddam as a leader worthy of respect from an Islamic perspective. That this was included in a section dedicated to undermining the Gulf Arabs, demonstrates how the Ba‘thists had integrated religious discourse into their international political strategies. The next day, the paper continued with the same theme, highlighting Abdullah Fadil’s meetings with his Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts, all of whom lauded Iraq’s commitment to Islamic cooperation between their countries.\(^{329}\)

Earlier in the month, Saddam had addressed a Popular Islamic Conference held in Baghdad and he had employed the same blistering and Islamic rhetoric that would shock Western observers several months later. Saddam welcomed his guests from around the Islamic world by stating that “Baghdad was built by the Muslims and it was founded on a virtuous foundation … it should always be in the service of the faithful wherever they are, and in the service of the nation of Islam.” He then launched into attacks on his enemies in the West and in Israel, using Islam and Arabism as his primary point of departure: “For what is this injustice compared to all the injustices that have happened to Arab holy sites, and Muslim holy sites, nay, the believers’ holy sites.”\(^{330}\) This speech and others like it employed the same style and substance that would later define the so-called jihad speeches. Thus, despite the attention they have received, neither the jihad speeches, nor Saddam’s Islamized rhetoric during the remainder of the Gulf Crisis represented a sudden shift in Saddam’s views on Islam.

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\(^{329}\) *al-Jumhuriyya*, June 27, 28, 1990.

\(^{330}\) “Some of Saddam Hussein's addresses and meetings with some foreign officials.” *CRRC*, SH-PDWN-D-000-997, February 1990-November 1990. (The speech was dated June 18, 1990).
In fact, the Iraqi press even published analyses of Saddam’s speech that made clear his views on Islam had not changed. One lengthy article from June 29th, 1990, for example, highlighted that Saddam’s statements were a reflection of the decades-old Ba’thist view that Arab nationalism (qawmiyya) and Islam were intimately linked.\textsuperscript{331} These were essentially the same arguments and explanations that the Ba’th Party’s founder, Michel Aflaq, had made in the 1940s and 1950s and Iraqi Ba’thists had echoed these views throughout Saddam’s rule. Thus, these Ba’thists had instrumentalized Islam by employing and enforcing their own Arab nationalist interpretation of it. This may have been a nuanced stance – one which they felt obligated to explain over and over again – but it was one to which Saddam was clearly committed, and had been for some time. Unfortunately, this nuance has been lost on many outside observers.

Importantly, the instrumentalization of Islam to this degree was only possible because the regime had worked to neutralize independent religious leaders and thus independent religious discourse in Iraq. By the time Saddam invaded Kuwait in August 1990, he had put a system in place to control and manipulate Iraqi discourse on religion. During the Gulf Crisis, as Jerry Long points out, Iraq’s religious leaders acted “in concert with the regime.”\textsuperscript{332} Long continues: “In looking … at establishment Islam within Iraq, one quickly notes how its message exactly parallel that of other agencies in government.” In fact, the rhetoric of Iraqi religious leaders “reflected both the current wartime parlance of the government and traditional Ba’thist influence.” Further, their “words bear a remarkable resemblance to those of Saddam himself years before.”\textsuperscript{333} This was not the result of happenstance. The regime was able to successfully coordinate this messaging through the religious institutions that Saddam had established over the previous

\textsuperscript{331} \textit{al-Jumhuriyya}, June 29, 1990.
\textsuperscript{332} Long, 108.
\textsuperscript{333} Long, 123-5.
decade. As Long notes, “when Saddam gave a message on jihad, as he did on 10 August, the Popular Islamic Conference, the National Assembly, ‘Holy Mecca Radio’ (a clandestine Iraqi broadcast aimed at Saudi troops), and Abdullah Fadil, the Iraqi minister of [Endowments] and Religious Affairs, immediately gave parallel and equally vigorous calls to holy war.” And of course, “The news media carried the same message without deviation, writing editorials that squared exactly with what the regime had said and done.” More surprising, however, were the reactions of local religious leaders throughout Iraq. In a sign of how deeply the regime had penetrated Iraq’s religious landscape, Long observes that “Religious dignitaries in the provinces likewise supported the regime, and they did so in terms similar to those of the commission of senior Iraqi ulama and with similar adulations.” The regime also used the Christians it had co-opted in Iraq to garner support abroad among international Christian organizations.

Saddam was even able to break – at least partially – some of the most ardently independent Shi’i scholars in the Najaf hawza. The Ba’thists detained Ayatollah al-Khu’i and forced him to issue a pro-Ba’thist fatwa in August 1990. Al-Khu’i proclaimed that it was not permissible to “seek support from heretics against Muslims.” Of course, the Ba’thists claimed that they were good Muslims and that their Saudi enemies were heretics. Even in periods of great distress during the Iran-Iraq War, the regime had not previously been powerful enough to arrest al-Khu’i or force him to say anything on their behalf (even something as ambiguous as the above statement). Clearly the regime’s prior inability to coerce him had not stemmed from a lack of

334 Long, 120.
335 Long 125.
336 Long, 130-1.
337 Long, 122.
desire; but rather a fear of the consequences. By 1990, the regime felt sufficiently comfortable with its control over Iraqi Shi‘ism to attempt such a bold move.\(^{338}\)

The coordinated instrumentalization of religion that Long observed during the Gulf Crisis is also clearly evident in the regime’s internal records. The regime’s strategic and operational plans often discussed a “psychological aspect” of the conflict in which Iraq would undermine its enemies by bombarding them with propaganda. In the regime’s planning, this propaganda was explicitly to “emphasize jihad for God’s sake in order to expel the American invaders and their allies,” as well as to “create hatred and hostility by all Muslims” for the Americans and their allies. To do so, the regime instructed its officials to “emphasize that the Islamic holy places are being violated by foreign forces who entered the holy land and defiled the Ka‘bah and the Prophet’s grave.” Although these were military plans, they integrated all elements of state power. The religious propaganda was to be handled primarily by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. After receiving its orders from the military, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs would then command Iraq’s religious leadership into action.\(^{339}\) In that sense, the regime’s documents confirm the deliberate and coordinated nature of Iraq’s religious propaganda, which Long and others had observed during the Gulf Crisis. However, before the release of the regime’s internal documents, even the most astute outside observer could not have known the extent to which this coordination directly resulted from a decade of coercing, co-opting, and creating religious leaders.

\(^{338}\) However, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, the regime may have overestimated its hegemony. Shortly after the war, Shi‘i areas of Iraq erupted in open rebellion.

\(^{339}\) “Miscellaneous information regarding the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the American operation to liberate Kuwait,” \textit{CRRC}, SH-GMID-D-000-998, September-October 1990.
Transition and Continuity

The Gulf Crisis was a period of transition for the regime, but not of major ideological shifts with regard to Islam. The Ba'thists basic outlook toward religion remained the same throughout the conflict, and – as will be discussed in the coming chapters – afterward. Accordingly, the focus on the regime’s supposedly dramatic ideological shifts concerning Islam during the 1990-1991 conflict has been misplaced. Instead, to understand the regime’s increased instrumentalization of Islam, one needs to investigate the authoritarian structures that were necessary for Ba'thist ideology to operate. The transformation that had occurred in the regime’s relationship to the religious landscape over the previous decade was the key factor in explaining the rise in religious rhetoric. This transformation resulted in the regime’s increased capability to control religious discourse in Iraq. Accordingly, what many outside observers mistook for the regime’s adoption of a more Islamic outlook, was actually a reflection of the regime’s comfort as well as its ability to instrumentalize its understanding of Islam more fervently. The coordination that occurred during the conflict between senior regime officials and religious actors across Iraq’s religious landscape would not have been possible a decade earlier. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the regime did not have large cadres of religious leaders willing to parrot Ba'thist views on Islam. Furthermore, even if some religious leaders were willing to support the regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Ba’thists did not trust them well enough to put them at the center of their strategic messaging and political legitimacy. Only after a decade of coercing, co-opting, and creating religious leaders as well as bureaucratizing and institutionalizing the religious landscape could the regime employ Islam in the way it that it did during the Gulf Crisis.

Nevertheless, while the increasing instrumentalization Islam in Ba’thist politics was not primarily ideological in nature, it did have significant ramifications for the relationship between
religion and politics in Iraq. The regime would lose much of its international standing and financial resources following the war. Many of the policies it had enacted in the 1980s would not be viable in the 1990s. Yet, as later chapters will demonstrate, the religious landscape which the regime had shaped in the 1980s was not destroyed by the war, and the benefits derived from the regime’s activation of this landscape during the 1990-1991 crisis foreshadowed the way in which the Ba‘thists would instrumentalize religion in the coming years. This had profound consequences for the regime’s policies as well as Iraqi religious life during the final decade of Ba‘thist rule.
The Gulf War may not have marked a major turning point in the regime’s understanding of religion. However, the war and its aftermath were extremely traumatic both for the regime and for Iraqi society. Such trauma necessarily had significant impacts on religion and politics in Iraq as well as on the regime’s policies in the religious sphere. Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, these changes should not be attributed to major ideological transformations, but rather to shifts in Iraq’s geopolitical position in relation to its neighbors as well as to the regime’s continued efforts to penetrate and control Iraq’s religious landscape.

The Geopolitics of Wahhabism

Although the Gulf War did not alter Saddam’s interpretation of Islam, it did shift the geopolitical landscape in the region. Prior to the war, Iraq had been allied with its Gulf Arab neighbors against the perceived threat of Iran. During and after the war, the Iraqi regime perceived the greatest geopolitical threat to be its Gulf Arab allies. Because Islam had been instrumentalized politically by most of the regional actors, the crisis also sent ripples through Iraq’s religious landscape. Saudi Arabia was particularly important in this respect. The modern Saudi state traces its origins to an 18th century alliance between the Saudi family and the founder of what has become known as the Wahhabi or salafi movement. This alliance between Wahhabi religious scholars and Saudi political rulers has provided Islamic legitimacy for the modern Saudi state,

\[\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{340}}\text{In this instance, the term “salafi” is used to describe the strict literalists who outsiders often call Wahhabis. They should not be confused with the Islamic modernists who are discussed in Chapter 1, and who are also sometimes referred to as salafis.}\]
now in its third manifestation.\textsuperscript{341} In the mid-to-late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Saudi Arabia began supporting likeminded or at least sympathetic Sunnis Islamists throughout the Islamic world as a means of influencing regional politics.\textsuperscript{342} It is not surprising, therefore, that increased tensions between Iraq and Saudi Arabia coincided with a rise in Sunni Islamist, and particularly Wahhabi agitation inside Iraq. For example, shortly after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Iraqi intelligence began documenting Wahhabi attempts to smuggle religious propaganda into Iraq. Under interrogation, some of these Wahhabi infiltrators claimed to have acted on the instructions of religious scholars in Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{343}

Other intelligence reports from the period stated that the “Wahhabi movement” was secretly operating in Iraq and that, while their main focus was spreading their creed, Wahhabis supported Saudi Arabia and were known “to use terror against those who disagree with them.” Iraqi intelligence also feared that because the Wahhabis were adamantly opposed to Shi‘ism and Sufism, they were likely to inflame what the regime saw as dangerous sectarian divisions within Iraq. Furthermore, the intelligence reports noted that the Wahhabis did not fear the regime’s coercive techniques or long prison sentences. In fact, Wahhabis viewed them as a necessary sacrifice and accepted them as their inevitable fate. Thus, the Ba‘thists found their usual coercive tactics to be inadequate.\textsuperscript{344}

Of course, religiously-based Sunni opposition movements had existed in Iraq prior to the Gulf Crisis. As discussed in Chapter 4, Iraqi intelligence had reported on other Sunni groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. The Brotherhood differed from the Wahhabis in a


number of ways. First, they were an overtly political organization with a defined structure and leadership. The Wahhabis on the other hand were loosely connected believers who adhered to a particular creed. They were not a clearly defined political organization with membership and a hierarchy of leadership. Another important distinction was that while the Ba‘thist regime in Iraq often suspected Iran and/or Syria of supporting the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood, there was no clear patron-client relationship. The Wahhabis, on the other hand, were clearly supported by, and for the most part loyal to Saudi Arabia.

Despite this history, the threat of Wahhabi infiltration during the Gulf Crisis was a new phenomenon. Importantly, the regime’s intelligence reports on domestic opposition previously did not even mention Wahhabis or salafis.\footnote{The regime used Wahhabi and Salafi synonymously.} Even as late at 1989, documents presented to Saddam only discussed “the Muslim Brotherhood and political movements that use religion as a cover.” The documents failed to mention either salafis or Wahhabis by name.\footnote{The Wahhabis and Salafis are not overtly political. They do not form political cells or movements and therefore are less conspicuous. However, because of their suspected ties to Saudi Arabia, the regime considered them a political front for the Saudis.} Even though they were not technically a political organization, one can assume that they fell under the ambiguous category: “other political movements that use religion as a cover.”\footnote{“Untitled,” BRCC, 3778-0000 (0008-0010), May 26, 1990. (It should be noted that while this report is dated May 1990, it covers the year 1989.)} The next year, that would change. In 1990, Wahhabis appeared in the reports and were depicted as a clear threat.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the problems the Wahhabis posed during the Gulf Crisis were significantly different from those the regime had faced in its interactions with Shi‘i and Sunni Islamists during the previous decade. At the beginning of the 1980s, the regime had very little influence over Iraq’s religious landscape. Thus it worked to penetrate space that was
hitherto outside state control. In doing so, it encountered entrenched Islamists as well as independent and uncooperative religious leaders. Intelligence reports from the Gulf Crisis (and afterword, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters) present a new problem. Sunni Islamists, and Wahhabis in particular, were encroaching on space that the regime had already conquered. Thus, the Ba‘thist strategy began to focus more on maintaining the regime’s authoritarian grip, rather than establishing it. In other words, instead of working to penetrate Iraq’s religious landscape, the Ba‘thists began to focus on keeping others out.

This shift is evident both in the way that the regime’s reports describe the Wahhabis, and their methods for dealing with them. In August 1990, a report prepared for Saddam on the Wahhabis suggested that they were gaining influence. However, unlike previous reports on Islamists, it presented Wahhabism as a new phenomenon that had only recently come to Iraq. In contrast to Shi‘i Islamists in the early 1980s, the Wahhabis were not deeply entrenched in Iraqi society or the local religious landscape. Therefore, in addition to arresting members of the movement, the regime’s plans also suggested that Party and security officials should meet with the families of suspected Wahhabis to enlighten them about the nature and intentions of the movement.³⁴⁸ Hence, these plans carried an underlining assumption: Wahhabis were not Wahhabis because they came from Wahhabi families. Most of them had been recently recruited and their non-Wahhabi families could provide assistance in influencing them to abandon their new religious tendencies.³⁴⁹ In contrast, when dealing with Shi‘i Islamists in the 1980s, the

³⁴⁹ Though Wahhabism has spread far beyond the borders of its Saudi homeland over the past decades, the first adherents of Wahhabism outside Saudi Arabia were often seen as extremists, or even “deviant.” Thus it would have made sense to alert their families to such beliefs in the hope that they would intervene. See a similar example of Wahhabism spreading to Yemen: Laurent Bonnefoy, Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 80-6.
regime assumed that they were integrated into decades-old family networks. Family members of suspected Shi‘i Islamists were considered part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Despite these differences, the regime’s experience with Shi‘i Islamists in the 1980s provided it with tried and true methods for dealing with a foreign-backed religious opposition. Special care was taken to prohibit anyone with Wahhabi sympathies from attending the military academies or other sensitive educational institutions. The Ba‘thists also began depicting Wahhabism as heretical and an abominable innovation that had little to do with true Islam – just as they had done to Khomeini and his followers in the 1980s. The regime then removed books that “delve into Wahhabi thought” from markets and bookstores. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture and Information was ordered “to strengthen its censorship of texts which contain the ideas of this [Wahhabi] movement and prevent their circulation...” Concurrently, The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research conducted “a survey of the libraries in their colleges, institutes, and schools – especially if they were Islamic.” They then removed all “books, especially from this and [other] movements which are not permitted to be distributed.” The regime combined these actions with a massive and hitherto unprecedented effort to survey every mosque in the country and to root out all Wahhabi elements. This would set a precedent that, as Chapters 8, 9, and 10 will detail, dramatically increased Ba‘thist control over religion.

The regime’s tactics were not just defensive (i.e. identifying and eliminating problematic elements). By this time, it had developed its own cadre of loyal religious scholars who were willing to toe the Ba‘thist line. It used them not only to contradict Wahhabis arguments, but also to aggressively spread Ba‘thist interpretations of Islam. In doing so, the regime hoped to fortify the population against Wahhabi proselytization. For example, the regime ordered the Ministry of

Endowments and Religious Affairs to “increase the Qur’an teaching sessions which are under its direct guidance” and to “assign imams and sermon-givers in the mosques to erode [the influence] of this [Wahhabi] movement and to expose its harmful intentions during their sermons.”

Religious Institutions in the Wake of the Gulf War

The ramifications of Iraq’s move against the Wahhabis and their Gulf Arab patrons went far beyond countering certain theological arguments. It sent tremors through Iraq’s official religious establishment. In the early 1980s, when Saddam began actively instrumentalizing Islam, he had done so with the aid of the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs. Thus several of Iraq’s most important Islamic institutions were indelibly linked to a Saudi-Wahhabi establishment that the Ba’thists now portrayed as heretical.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, Saddam continued to rely on the Popular Islamic Conference and the Islamic scholars that it brought together throughout the Gulf Crisis. For example, in December 1990, Iraq announced that it would hold a Popular Islamic Conference in which “350 Muslims from around the world will gather in Baghdad six days before the U.N. deadline [for Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait] … in a show of support for President Saddam Hussein.” The conference was held as planned on January 9-11, 1991. It should not be forgotten, however, that the Popular Islamic Conference was originally a joint Saudi-Iraqi venture. The Saudis obviously took issue with Saddam’s use of the conference to oppose Saudi interests. Therefore, they held their own shadow Popular Islamic Conference in Mecca on the same dates as its Iraqi counterpart. Delegates to the Saudi conference included prominent Saudi scholars, the Sheikh of al-Azhar, and importantly, the chairman of PICO’s executive committee, Ma’ruf al-Dawalibi.

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352 “Iraq Invites Muslims to Gather in Baghdad,” Toronto Star, December 31, 1990. FBIS.
Unsurprisingly, the Saudi Popular Islamic Conference declared that Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait “violated the very principles of Islam,” and that religious scholars who supported Saddam were “committing a sinful act.”

Another related religious institution that the Saudis had helped create in Iraq was the Saddam University of Islamic Studies. Though this university claimed to be independent, it was originally an offshoot of the Popular Islamic Conference. It enjoyed financial support and religious legitimacy from the same Saudi and Gulf Arab sources. As recently as two months prior to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the university remained a joint project between Iraqi Ba’thists and Gulf Arabs. The 1990-1 crisis irrevocably altered that relationship and thus had obvious repercussions for the university’s funding.

The university’s senior leadership acknowledged this setback in internal correspondences. For example, in the months after the war, the new president of the university, Muhammad Majid al-Sa’id, bluntly stated that it was “suffering from many problems and constraints.” Most of these difficulties were financial and material. There were also organizational inconsistencies inherent in the university’s original plan. As discussed in Chapter 5, the plan officially called for the university to be independent, but in reality the regime maintained tight control over it. When al-Sa’id became president, he seems not to have realized that this supposed independence was a farce.

To remedy these “problems and constraints” he asked that the Iraqi regime – as opposed to the Gulf Arabs – to address the university’s financial and material needs. He also requested

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355 The circumstances of his appointment and the dismissal of the previous president, Bashshar ʿAwad Maʿruf, will be discussed below.

that the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs loosen its grip over the university’s internal affairs.\textsuperscript{357} Saddam responded with a presidential decree authorizing a new board of trustees – devoid of the Gulf Arabs who once prominently sat on it – and granting the faculty and staff of the university increased privileges. The decree also ordered an expansion of the university’s campus through the construction of new buildings and the commandeering of some existing buildings in the area. Saddam then pledged to provide all the university’s financial and material needs, though tellingly, he did not mention the idea of increased independence. The regime would maintain its iron grip on the university until the end.\textsuperscript{358}

The prestige of Saddam University for Islamic Studies actually increased after forgoing Saudi money. By all accounts it emerged as an important center for Islamic learning in the early 1990s. As Amatzia Baram has argued, the university’s “students were hand-picked and, with a select teaching staff and generous budgets, it was, indeed, an elite school.” Furthermore, “When the president of the university needed funds he could go directly to the very top and receive all that he needed.”\textsuperscript{359}

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that while Baram saw the university as an important step in Saddam’s opening up to religion, or even more dramatically, his moving from “militant secularism to Islamism,” the regime’s documents give no evidence of such a transformation. In fact, the purpose of the university in the 1990s was to undermine Islamists. As its new president argued, one of the central purposes of the university was to confront Islamist preachers and more generally, to undermine “the intellectual campaign and creed of Islamists.” Furthermore, similar to his Ba’thist predecessors in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the university’s leadership continued to view Islam as dual-natured – in other words as both potentially useful, but also

\textsuperscript{358} “Saddam University for Islamic Studies,” \textit{BRCC}, 3493_.0001 (0020-0021), October 17, 1992.
\textsuperscript{359} Amatzia Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism,” 16-7.
potentially threatening. Thus, while in 1983, Ba‘thist intellectuals had argued that “the dual nature of religion” made Islam both the “inspiration” for Ba‘thism and “one of the most dangerous problems present in modern Arab society,”360 in 1992, al-Sa‘id similarly argued that the dual nature of religion meant that the Saddam University for Islamic Studies could not be a normal or traditional university. Indeed, he asserted, the Islamic university carried a specific message (risala), “but it is [both] a dangerous and a great message.”361 Thus, it needed to be treated with particular sensitivity. As will be shown in the following chapters, in practice this meant that the regime would make the university a centerpiece of Iraq’s political strategies but at the same time the Ba‘thists would devote considerable time and resources to ensure that those who maintained interpretations of Islam which could potentially undermine the regime were kept off of the campus.

In that sense, not only did the university’s view of Islam remain unchanged from earlier Ba‘thist interpretations, its mission in the 1990s remained the same. Al-Sa‘id’s report on the university made clear that its purpose was to promote a Ba‘thist interpretation of Islam as well as to create cadres of domestic and international Islamic leaders who would support Saddam and his regime.362 Thus, the Saddam University for Islamic Studies was not intended to empower Iraq’s religious sphere, but rather to control it. Likewise, it was not a step on the road to Islamism, but rather, one more brick in the regime’s authoritarian structure.

The fate of the Popular Islamic Conference and the Saddam University for Islamic Studies highlights an important transformation that had taken place in the relationship between the Ba‘thist regime and Iraq’s religious landscape. When the Ba‘thists were forced to decouple

these two institutions from their Saudi and Gulf Arab sponsors, they were able to do so with little-to-no complications. In the early 1980s, the Ba’thists could not effectively operate these institutions on their own. They had limited experience in religious affairs, and there were not nearly enough loyal Ba’thist Islamic leaders to run them. A decade later, however, Saddam had created a critical mass of reliable religious scholars. He also had a bureaucracy in place to control them. Henceforth, he would no longer require outside assistance in matters of religion.

**The Fight against Sectarianism after the Gulf Crisis**

Just as the regime’s changing relationship with Wahhabis and their Saudi sponsors would transform religious institutions in Iraq, developments among the Shi’is during and immediately after the Gulf War would affect the regime’s approach toward controlling religion in Iraq.

In the wake of Iraq’s defeat and expulsion from Kuwait, the international community encouraged the Shi’is of southern Iraq to rise up and overthrow Saddam. This encouragement was not accompanied by material support and Saddam brutally crushed the rebellion. In the process, his regime destroyed several southern Iraqi cities and condemned untold numbers of Shi’is to prisons or mass graves. The uprising in southern Iraq that followed the 1991 Gulf War has produced a number of myths about the regime’s policies and actions. Too often, historians have accepted these myths uncritically.\(^{363}\) As a result, the standard narrative of Iraqi history usually presents the regime, and Saddam in particular, as shifting to harsh anti-Shi’i policies in the aftermath of the 1991 crisis.\(^{364}\) The two most prominent myths surrounding the regime’s policies in 1991 highlight this point. The first is that regime forces who put down the uprising were motivated by anti-Shi’i sentiments and that they prominently employed slogans such as “no

\(^{363}\) For an overview of these myths and their acceptance, see: Haddad, 65-84, 117-132.

\(^{364}\) Makiya, xxx-xxxi; Haddad, 13; Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime*, 135-6; Tripp, 264-71; Cockburn, 79.
Shi‘is after today.” The second myth states that in April 1991, Saddam penned a series of seven anti-Shi‘i articles in the official Ba‘thist newspaper, *al-Thawra.*\(^{365}\) Scholars of Iraq have tended to uncritically accept Saddam’s authorship of these articles and have argued that these *al-Thawra* articles became the basis of Iraqi policies towards Shi‘is and Shi‘ism for the remainder of Saddam’s rule. Nevertheless, a close examination of these two myths seriously challenges their historicity.

The first myth – that the regime officials who put down the uprising were motivated by anti-Shi‘i sentiments – cannot be disproved, but it needs to be destabilized. The facts surrounding this myth are murky. The Shi‘i opposition claimed that the regime acted in a blatantly sectarian manner in putting down the 1991 uprising. However, many supporters of the regime dispute the basic facts of such claims. No concrete evidence exists to support either side.\(^{366}\) Nevertheless, some circumstantial evidence challenges the myth that it was a strictly sectarian affair. It is true that Saddam sent his Republican Guard south to help put down the uprising, and that the Republican Guard largely consisted of soldiers from the Sunni regions surrounding Saddam’s hometown of Tikrit. However, these were not the only regime elements involved in repressing the uprising. Some Shi‘i clans such as Banu Malik of Basra and a clan from the area of Hamza in Qadisiyya supported the regime and fought on behalf of the regime to suppress the rebellion.\(^{367}\) Moreover, one of the highest ranking regime officials directly involved in putting down the uprising was a Shi‘i – Muhammad Hamza al-Zubeidi,\(^{368}\) and one of the Republican Guard

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\(^{365}\) These articles were titled: “What happened in late 1990 and these months of 1991, and why did it happen.” Some – though unfortunately not all –can be found in the Moshe Dayan Center’s Arabic newspaper archive at Tel Aviv University. For a good overview of the articles, see Haddad, 120-7.

\(^{366}\) Haddad, 65-86.


\(^{368}\) Bassam Yousif, “The Political Economy of Sectarianism in Iraq,” *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, Volume 4, Number 3 (2010): 361. Soon after, Saddam appointed him to be prime minister. This further undermines the claim that Shi‘is were purged from the party and senior positions within the regime.
divisions was commanded by the Shi‘i general ‘Abd al-Wahid Shanan Aal Ribabat. It is difficult to imagine that these Shi‘is were promoting slogans such as “no Shi‘is after today.” This does not preclude the possibility that some Sunni soldiers did so. However, their actions were probably due to a breakdown in discipline, rather than an indicator of the regime’s official policy.

The second myth posits that the April 1991 articles in al-Thawra were a major turning point in Saddam’s approach to Iraq’s Shi‘is. The articles in al-Thawra did depart from the regime’s official stance on Shi‘ism. In some cases, they seem to blame Shi‘ism for the uprisings and the Shi‘is for betraying the regime. The simple fact that they employed the term Shi‘i in a political sense was a deviation from the regime’s public discourse in the 1980s. That this series of articles appeared in the official newspaper of the Iraqi Ba‘th Party is certainly important, but one needs to be careful about what conclusions to draw. The articles did not indicate who had authored them. The Shi‘i opposition attributed them to Saddam. In doing so, they could paint him as openly anti-Shi‘i and thus foster discontent among Iraq’s Shi‘i majority. Despite the lack of any evidence, Western scholarship on Iraq has continually repeated this rumor. And because the articles were attributed to Saddam, most scholars of Iraq have assumed that they were a major turning point in his views on Shi‘ism. Moreover, the secondary literature on Iraq often treats them as the official policy of the regime in the decade that followed. Eric Davis, for example, argues that these articles became “the party line.” Fanar Haddad argues that “the articles were, at the very least, reflective of Saddam’s views and

369 Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, 225.
370 This slogan has become a centerpiece of Shi‘i depictions of 1991.
371 Haddad, 120; Davis, 243.
372 For example, Davis, 242; Cockburn, 79.
373 Davis, 248.
Dina Khoury likewise claims that the ideas expressed in the articles “became the official version and affected state policies in the south and mid-Euphrates regions of Iraq until the regime’s demise in 2003.” However, no evidence has emerged to suggest that Saddam actually wrote the articles, that they reflected his views, or that they became the basis of the regime’s policy. In fact, a closer analysis suggests that the opposite is true on all accounts.

Iraqis familiar with Saddam’s writings have argued that these articles deviate significantly from Saddam’s prose in terms of style and vocabulary. Moreover, in private conversations, Saddam continued to adhere to his earlier non-sectarian views on Shi‘ism. He does not appear to have had a change of heart. Finally, as will be shown below, evidence from the regime’s archive overwhelmingly demonstrates that the regime did not adopt these anti-Shi‘i views as the basis of its official policies.

Instead of interpreting these events as a shift toward sectarian policies, the regime’s internal records suggest that they were the outward manifestations of internal regime struggles over the ongoing process of Ba‘thist penetration into Iraq’s religious sphere. As discussed in Chapter 5, senior regime officials were aware that some of their “friends” working in the Iraqi religious sphere during the mid-to-late 1980s held views on Shi‘ism that were not completely in line with the regime’s official non-sectarian ideology. However, the regime had little recourse. There simply were not enough religious leaders in Iraq who were willing to support Saddam. Consequently, as long as these scholars paid lip-service to Ba‘thist ideology and did not openly foment sectarianism, the regime tended to overlook some of their infractions. After the 1991

374 Haddad, 241.
375 Khoury, Iraq in Wartime, 135-6.
376 See, Davis, 244, footnote 54. The strength of the narrative depicting Saddam as the author is demonstrated by the fact that even after Davis presents this linguistic evidence against the theory of Saddam’s authorship, he continues to portray Saddam as having penned them.
uprising in southern Iraq, that approach became untenable. Therefore, the regime attempted to eliminate anti-Shi’i views more actively.

Following the Gulf War, the most prominent official to make the case against attacking the Shi’is and the need for reform within the regime was the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Abdullah Fadil. In January 1992, the Iraqi military drafted a plan to deal with the Shi’i insurrection in the south. It included a suggestion that the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs hold a conference in which senior Iraqi religious scholars would counter Khomeini’s theory of Islamic Government (wilayat al-faqih). The conference would also work to discredit exiled Iraqi religious leaders such as the Iranian based Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim.378

The Ba’th Party Secretariat forwarded the plan to Abdullah Fadil. In his response, Abdullah Fadil acknowledged that Khomeini’s ideas represented reprehensible Persian innovations and that they were a threat to the regime. However, he argued that in countering the insurrection, the regime had given the Iranians and the foreign media an opportunity to describe the Iraqi Ba’thists as Sunni sectarians who wanted to eliminate Shi’ism. He then suggested that “under the present conditions,” the regime should not further “inflame” this sentiment by attacking Shi’i religious leaders. Doing so, he insisted, would only strengthen the Iranian regime and its supporters.379

Abdullah Fadil thus subtly acknowledged that the anti-Shi’i views of some Ba’thists were a liability to the regime. It was these problematic views which appeared in the al-Thawra articles. Far from adopting those views, Saddam would heed Abdullah Fadil’s advice. The threat

378 It should be noted that the military was dictating to the religious scholars what arguments they needed to make. This should give pause to anyone who suggests that there was an opening of religious discourse in Iraq in the wake of the Gulf Crisis. For a copy of the plan see: “Information,” BRCC, 2984_0000 (0079-0080), January 28, 1992.
of sectarianism strife, combined with the increased capacity of the Ba’thist regime to operate in the religious sphere finally gave Saddam the impetus to eliminate some of the problematic sectarian elements within the regime sponsored religious leadership. Most prominently, he decided that Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma’ruf’s views on Shi‘ism were a liability. Saddam stripped him of his titles, dismissed him from his official positions, and then exiled him to Jordan. Other Sunni scholars who had ties with the former ally and now enemy, Saudi Arabia, were also marginalized. Ma’ruf al-Dawalibi (who had helped found the Popular Islamic Conference) and the rest of the Saudi contingent were no longer welcome or willing to help.

The regime also stepped up its efforts to repress sectarianism within the ranks of the Ba‘th Party and the security services. In 1992, everyone in the Army received a letter stating that they were not permitted to speak about Sunnism or Shi‘ism. The regime ordered the intelligence services to monitor and punish anyone who violated the order. In the regime’s records, one also finds incidences of such stipulations being implemented and enforced on the ground. For example, in reports on the Shi‘i Muharram ceremonies during the 1990s, one finds orders to report violations of regime policies “without expressing prejudice toward any Islamic ritual.” In other words, the regime attempted to limit anti-Shi‘i statements and accusations by Sunni Ba‘thists who were tasked with controlling potentially disruptive Shi‘i ceremonies.

As it had done in the 1980s, the regime promoted an Islam which did not delve into “differences in jurisprudence or sect” (fiqhi aw madhhabi). It hoped to “educate” the population about the “true” meaning of the Qur’an and to “correct much of what is alien to the stipulations

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381 Interview with former Iraqi Major General, who had worked in intelligence during this period, May 11, 2012. (The year of this letter may be slightly off, as it was an estimate. However, it was clearly in the early 1990s and after the uprisings in the south.)
of the Islamic Shari'a.” However, during the 1990s, such efforts to promote a generic, non-sectarian Islam coincided with a policy to repress sectarian sentiments actively. Thus in 1995, Saddam issued a law which required a three year prison sentence for anyone who: insulted the beliefs of another “religious sect”; debased their rituals or interfered with the celebrations surrounding those rituals; destroyed the place of worship of any religious sect; printed or distributed “holy books for a religious sect that deliberately pervert their text or change their meaning;” or finally, for anyone who insulted a sanctified subject of a religious text. The new law was distributed to all Party branches. In 1997, the Iraqi Intelligence Service overhauled its “Hostile Activity Directorate,” adding sections specifically devoted to neutralizing sectarianism. The regime was particularly concerned with Salafis and Wahhabis who preached explicitly anti-Shi‘i interpretations of Islam. These laws and administrative actions were clearly meant to deal with problematic sectarian sentiments among the general population. To some extent they were also an admission that such sentiments existed. This was an admission that Saddam had been unwilling to make previously.

It should be noted, however, that this increased attention afforded to sectarianism did not temper the regime’s anti-Iranian views or the tenuous line it drew between acceptable Shi‘ism and unacceptable “Persian” or sectarian practices. In fact, the same report cited above argued that

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386 The regime’s reports use these terms interchangeably.
387 Ba‘thist officials constantly monitored mosques, especially during Friday sermons. They explicitly looked for anyone spreading sectarian ideas. See: BRCC, 3199_0002, 1992; BRCC, 2753_0000, 1995; and, BRCC, 2249_0000, 1998.
certain practices normally associated with Shi‘ism were “reprehensible Persian innovations which benefit the enemies.”

Thus, despite some blatantly anti-Shi‘i views – such as those expressed in the al-Thawra articles after the uprisings in the south – the regime did not view its policies as those of a Sunni regime. In fact, it viewed itself in exactly the opposite terms. The regime also held anti-Salafi views and as such tried to carve out a place for itself between different tendencies that it represented as errant and extremist. It worked to repress both Sunni and Shi‘i sectarian views that it had let slip through the cracks of its ideological control. Moreover, in the 1990s, the regime did not treat Shi‘is simply as Shi‘is. The Ba‘thists differentiated between those who had helped the regime in 1991 and those who did not. To add further nuance, the regime distinguished between those who took part in the uprising against the regime and those who simply looted; as well as between those who fled to Iran to escape the violence and then returned, and those who did not return. Interestingly, the regime also implicated some Sunnis in the uprisings. These Sunnis suffered the same grim fate as their Shi‘i counterparts. As such, even in the aftermath of the 1991 uprising, the regime continued to treat Shi‘is as individuals and as members of families and tribes, rather than as a sect.

Of course, the regime’s strategy of non-sectarian ecumenism was imperfect. The Ba‘thists considered certain practices, such as marching on foot during the month of Muharram, as abominable “Persian” innovations, while most Shi‘is saw these processions as orthodox

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389 For example, in the 1990s uprising, forms that the regime use to classify people contained the category: “His and his family’s position toward the events of the page of treason and treachery.” The “page of treason and treachery” was a euphemism for the 1991 uprising. For an example of the form, see: “Form requesting information,” BRCC, 3246_0000 (0079), undated.
391 See, Shahadat Iraqiyya
Shi‘ism. As such, there was often a gap between intent and perception. Policies that the regime intended to be anti-Persian or anti-Islamist, were often perceived by Shi‘is as sectarian.

Furthermore, as discussed in previous chapters, Ba‘thist attempts to formulate a generic, non-sectarian Islam was often Sunni by default. For example, an examination of Iraqi schoolbooks in the 1990s demonstrates a Sunni bias. While the lessons on Islam paid a great deal of respect to Shi‘i figures such as Imam Ali and his sons, they never openly contradicted Sunni beliefs. On the other hand, however, the books venerated the so-called Rightly Guided Caliphs, whom Sunnis consider legitimate, but the first three of whom are illegitimate usurpers in the Shi‘i tradition.392 This type of bias was also evident in training material for Ba‘th Party cells.393 As such, the Ba‘th Party promoted a generic Islam which was often by default more Sunni than Shi‘i. However, it is incorrect to assert that regime became more sectarian in the wake of the Gulf Crisis. If anything, the opposite is true. The regime more actively clamped down on open expressions of sectarianism.

392 For example, see a fifth grade textbook from the series Tarbiya Islamiyya which venerates both Ali and Abu Bakr, calling Abu Bakr the first of the “Rightly Guided Caliphs”: Ahmad Ali Khatib, Al-Tarbiya al-Islamiyya lil-Saff al-Khamis al-Ibtida‘i (Iraq: Ministry of Education, 1997), 38-9.
393 See for example: “Makarim Al-Qa‘id Section Command Meeting Minutes” CRRC, SH-BATH-D-001-094, October 2002-March 2003.
Chapter 8: The Religious Deep State

Re-Thinking Religion and State in 1990s Iraq

The 1991 war significantly transformed Iraqi state-society relations. Most dramatically, the regime largely lost control over the Kurdish regions in the north. Within the Arab regions, state-society relations were also dramatically altered. Of particular interest to this dissertation, the regime related to the religious landscape differently than it had in earlier decades.

Earlier chapters detailed that in the 1970s and early 1980s the Ba'athists had very little control over Iraq’s religious leaders. Thus, their first priority was to map Iraq’s religious landscape and eliminate hostile elements. They did this through placing strict limitations on who could work as a sermon-giver. However, in the early 1980s, the Ba’thists had trouble finding enough imams or sermon-givers whom they trusted. Mosques throughout the countryside were left leaderless. Iraqis complained about these policies, but to no avail. Instead of loosening their restrictions, the Ba’thists hoped to address the dearth of trusted religious leaders by constructing an Iraqi religious leadership that was loyal to their regime.

By the 1990s, the Ba’thists were able to reap the fruits of their efforts. After two decades in power, the regime enjoyed ample control over the religious landscape. It had filled the mosques with co-opted – or at minimum, compliant – religious leaders and almost all religious institutions were now firmly rooted in the Ba‘thists’ authoritarian system. In other words, the regime had constructed what could be called a “religious deep state.” This religious deep state

394 Joel Migdal claims that “social control” can take three forms: Compliance, Participation, and Legitimation. One can find examples of each of these in the regime’s interaction with Iraqi religious leaders. Some religious leaders were simply compliant. Others actively participated in the regime’s schemes, and some were involved in legitimation. Throughout the following chapters, I will use the term control to cover all of these. While often it is evident which type of control I intend, one can assume that at minimum I mean compliant. Joel Migdal, Strong Societies and Weak States, 32-3.
395 “Modification,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0171), February 17, 1985.
396 See Chapter 1.
would play an indispensable role in Iraqi policies toward religion during the 1990s and early 2000s.

However, before outlining how the religious deep state functioned and its effect on the regime’s policies, it is important to be clear about what the religious deep state was and what it was not. First and foremost, it was not the result of a shift in rhetoric or symbols. It was not about new interpretations of religion and it was not created by speeches or propaganda. As previous chapters have made clear, it was about people, institutions, and bureaucracy. Creating it was a long, arduous process, carried out by countless officials, to co-opt, coerce, and create religious landscape which would be capable of contributing to the Ba‘thists’ political goals.

The result of this process was a shift in the manner that the regime related to the religious landscape. Whereas previously the regime was distrustful and therefore cautious when employing the religious landscape for political goals, by the 1990s the regime felt much more comfortable with its level of control over Iraqi religious leaders and therefore it was much less restrained in instrumentalizing religion in its public policies. Following the Gulf War, the regime lost much of its financial resources and traditional forms of power due to harsh international sanctions. However, it was able to compensate for these fiscal constraints by relying on the large cohort of loyal religious leaders that it had coerced, co-opted, and created since the late-1970s. These religious leaders performed some of the functions previously carried out by the state. In other words, the regime responded to the fiscal constraints of the 1990s by replacing certain costly state apparatuses with loyal elements within the religious sphere. Saddam’s deputy, Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, organized trusted religious scholars to participate in what the regime termed “voluntary popular religious supervision.” The primary goal of this project was for the religious scholars to “treat condemnable phenomena in society.” The program specifically combated theft,
bribery, extortion, and other social ills. The regime also expected these religious leaders to instill a sense of “integrity” and “duty” in state employees as well as foster respect for the regime’s leadership among the general population. In that sense, the regime turned to religious leaders to perform functions that teachers, police, and state run media had carried out in the past.

However, these religious scholars were not independent from the regime. The regime organized them into committees in order to “create a system for supervising” the people. These committees were designed to “benefit from the existing popular structures and the [security] services that specialize in monitoring [the population].” They would also work closely with the Ministries of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Justice, Interior, Labor, and Society. In other words, these religious leaders were loyal to the regime and deeply enmeshed in its authoritarian structures. The main benefit that this so called “voluntary popular religious supervision” provided was, as Saddam’s Presidential Office made clear, it would not cost any money. The religious leaders who implemented this plan had been indoctrinated into the Ba’thist system and saw their participation as a duty of patriotic religious leaders in Iraq. Such strategies allowed the state to withdraw services from some areas while mitigating the regime’s loss of control over Iraqi society.

The relationship between the state’s withdrawal in some areas and the empowering of an entrenched religious deep state has been completely overlooked in the secondary literature on 1990s Iraq. The historiography of Iraq in this period tends to portray the Iraqi Ba’th Party (and thus the regime itself) as in uncontrolled retreat. Because the Iraqi Ba’thists were isolated internationally and weakened by sanctions, the secondary literature on Iraq has depicted them as unable able to control large segments of the Iraqi population. As a result, many analysts

observed, the regime began to permit – or was unable to prevent – the opening of “autonomous social spaces” as well as discussions of topics once considered taboo.\footnote{Rohde, \textit{State-Society Relations}, 13} Even before the fall of the regime, scholars such as Kanan Makiya argued that the regime had lost control over society.\footnote{Makiya, \textit{Republic of Fear}, xv.} In the run-up to the 2003 invasion, Bernard Lewis described Iraq as the “already crumbling tyranny of Saddam Hussein.”\footnote{Bernard Lewis, \textit{Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian} (New York: Viking, 2012), 329-30. It should be noted that in the memoir, he claims to have opposed the Bush administration’s policies concerning the war, but either way, his assumptions about the frailty of Saddam’s regime clearly confirmed the administration’s view that war was a reasonable option.} Writing after the invasion, Eric Davis highlighted what he terms “counter-hegemonic” forces in the 1990s.\footnote{Davis, 227.} Achim Rohde has gone as far as to liken this period in Iraq to the emergence of civil society in other authoritarian states.\footnote{Rohde, \textit{State-Society Relations}, 13.}

Importantly, this narrative of the regime’s loss of control often focuses on mosques and other religious establishments. The secondary literature on Iraq depicts the religious landscape as beginning to function independently from the regime. Fanar Haddad, observed that in the 1990s, religious leaders began performing functions once carried out by the state. Thus, Haddad argues that when the state faced a fiscal crisis in the 1990s, “the ensuing vacuum was filled largely by religious networks that satisfied the people’s need for assurance and some of the services previously provided by the state.”\footnote{Haddad, 109.} However, implicit in Haddad’s analysis is an Iraqi religious landscape that operated independently from the regime. That claim needs to be reexamined. Similarly, Ronen Zeidel argues that in the 1990s, “grassroots religious leaders” began to emerge in Iraq’s new mosques and the Saddam University for Islamic Studies. Thus, he suggests that the mosques were out of the regime’s control and that “inside their [the mosques’] walls, people
could feel free." Other academic accounts of the period portray an opening of religious discourse in Iraq and a new found freedom for Iraqi religious leaders. Some have even argued that the regime permitted (or even encouraged) the spread of Islamism.

The regime’s internal documents challenge this narrative. Throughout the 1990s, the regime maintained detailed records on the political loyalty of every Iraqi religious leader and mosque. The national surveys they used to track such data will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters, but for now it is worth mentioning that by 1995, the regime considered only seventy out of 1,501 religious leaders in the Iraq to be problematic. As Aaron Faust has argued, these numbers demonstrate that the Ba’thists “succeeded in filling religious posts throughout the country with loyalists and purging Islamists, both Shi’i and Sunni.” In addition to the regime’s records, independent sources have noted that by the end of Saddam’s rule, some of the most ardent religious opposition began to work with the regime. For example, Muhsin abd al-Hamid was one of the last leaders of the Iraqi Muslim Brotherhood to avoid exile, prison, or death. He remained in Iraq throughout Saddam’s presidency. However, he was eventually arrested and tortured in the mid-1990s. It is unclear how or why he was released from prison, but by the end of Saddam’s rule, he was actively contributing to regime-sponsored propaganda against other Islamic leaders. Thus, even if regime officials inflated its numbers, it is fair to state that most Iraqi religious leaders were either co-opted by the regime or pretended to be. Iraqis certainly were not “free” inside the walls of mosques.

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406 Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism.”
407 Faust, 109.
408 Rashid al-Khayyun, 100 ‘am min al-Islam al-Siyasi bi-l-‘Iraq, vol. 2-al-Sunna, 83. For more on the co-optation of religious leaders in the 1990s and early 2000s, see Chapter 11.
Other scholars who have examined the regime records have been equally skeptical about the extent of the Ba'thist regime’s demise in the 1990s. For example, Joseph Sassoon argues “the lack of documents until now has prevented us from analyzing the regime’s complexities. For instance, we now know from the archives that the Ba'th Party did not weaken in the 1990s: no committee was ever set up without a representative of the party secretariat, and membership increased by roughly 38 percent between 1991 and 1996.”

Sassoon explains earlier misperceptions by distinguishing the Iraqi state from the Ba'th Party. He claims that the state was weakened and that outside observers mistook this for the weakening of the ruling Party. It is undeniable that the state lost much of its economic resources in the 1990s. It could no longer (or at least chose not to) fund basic services, let alone the large economic development projects of earlier decades. This weakened the regime’s position considerably as it could not offer as many incentives to Iraqi society. However, one should not assume – as has been the case in much of the historiography up until this point – that these diminished financial resources led to the regime’s inability to control the Iraqi population. If the Ba’thist regime was weakened in that it lost the ability to provide lavish incentives and development projects, it often made up for it in other ways. Fear, of course, played a role. Yet, fear was only the most overt component of a system that relied on entrenched loyalists who occupied almost all positions of authority. These loyal Ba’thists – not independent or Islamist religious leaders – formed the foundation of Iraqi religious policy during the 1990s.

The Ba’thists’ construction of a religious deep state that was loyal to the regime also had significant repercussions for their public policies and particularly the willingness of Saddam to employ Islam in the public sphere. In June 1993, Saddam announced a national “Faith

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Campaign” with great fanfare. Commemorating its launch, he delivered grandiose speeches amidst the pomp of expansive official ceremonies. The tightly controlled Iraqi press highlighted these events on the front pages of newspapers and in the broadcast news.\footnote{See for example the front-page of the leading daily: \textit{al-Jumhuriyya}, June 25, 1993.} The inauguration of the Faith Campaign began a steady proliferation of regime-sponsored religion in Iraq. Some observers understood this as evidence that Saddam had shifted course, foregoing his Ba‘thist roots, and instead attempting to ride the rising tide of Islamism.\footnote{Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism.”} This claim also needs to be reconsidered.

In the 1990s, Ba‘thized religious officials in Iraq continued to champion the same Ba‘thist views of religion which Saddam had articulated at the beginning of his presidency. Indeed, behind closed doors, the regime’s outlook toward religion during the 1990s appeared remarkably similar to its outlook in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In both cases, Ba‘thists highlighted that they were believers in God. They depicted Islam as the embodiment of Arabism and they often blurred the lines between the two. Throughout Saddam’s presidency, the Iraqi Ba‘thists maintained the propensity and even the desire to employ these Ba‘thist interpretations of religion politically – \textit{as long as it could do so without jeopardizing the regime’s security or legitimacy}. In the early 1980s, the regime’s lack of control over Iraq’s religious landscape meant that they could not do so. By the 1990s, however, the regime had developed a critical mass of loyal religious leaders and the Ba‘thist leadership felt comfortable that they would propagate the “correct” message. The Faith Campaign, therefore, resulted from a change in means; not in intent or ideology.

The point of the Faith Campaign was not to shift away from a Ba‘thist understanding of religion, but rather to accelerate the spread of this interpretation of religion throughout Iraqi
society. Through the Faith Campaign, the regime attempted, but was never completely successful in establishing Ba‘thist hegemony over Iraq’s religious discourse.\textsuperscript{412} This was similar to the manner in which the regime treated intellectuals. Eric Davis, for example, argues that “In striving to achieve hegemony, the state employs ‘organic intellectuals’ to promote a worldview designed to delegitimize and marginalize alternative and competing political frameworks by stigmatizing their core assumptions.”\textsuperscript{413} The Ba‘thists maintained similar goals in the religious sphere. The regime expected Ba‘thized religious leaders to play an “organic” role so as to “delegitimize and marginalize alternative and competing” religious interpretations – particularly those put forth by Islamists. Thus, Iraqi religious leaders presented Ba‘thism, and Arab nationalism more generally, as “natural” and in line with “normal” interpretations of religion. In that sense, the Faith Campaign was not a turn towards Islamism, but an attempt to combat it.

**The Faith Campaign’s Roots in the Religious Deep State**

The religious deep state that the Ba‘thist regime had created during the 1970s and 1980s proved remarkably durable. The Gulf War in 1991 destroyed much of Iraq’s infrastructure and depleted it finances, but it did not replace the hundreds of religious leaders that the regime had coerced, co-opted and created over the past decades. Previous chapters have highlighted Saddam’s elimination of independent and hostile religious leaders. This process climaxed in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War when mass uprisings engulfed Iraq, especially, but not only in the Shi‘i south. The regime’s cleansing of undesirable elements in Iraq’s religious landscape during the uprising provided the Ba‘thists with an opportunity to continue rebuilding Iraqi Islam in accordance with

\textsuperscript{412} The word “hegemony” is employed here in a slight twist on the Gramscian sense of the term. Others have pointed to the utility of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in understanding the Iraqi Ba‘th’s policies toward intellectuals and political memory. See, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). Davis, 2.

\textsuperscript{413} Davis, 2.
their designs. Indeed, the regime intensified its policy of placing regime loyalists in almost every significant position of authority.

However, the regime’s ability to shape Iraq’s religious landscape in the 1990s was based on policies that Saddam had implemented a decade earlier. As outlined in previous chapters, Saddam had co-opted many of the religious scholars who had previously opposed, or were indifferent to his regime. These co-opted scholars supplemented, and to some extent conferred legitimacy on a wave of new, fully Ba’thized Islamic leaders. The regime developed these new leaders in the religious institutions that it had established in the 1980s. These institutions were explicitly designed, in the language of the regime’s plans, to “create an Islamic leadership” designed to “spread the proper [Ba’thist] Islamic understanding of the Arab spirit of Islam.” As such, the regime used them to produce a “young active leadership” that would “agree with the ideas of the President Leader.”

This “young active leadership” was the necessary foundation of the regime’s policies during the Faith Campaign. It was no coincidence, therefore, that Saddam’s announcement of the Faith Campaign occurred the same week as the first cohort graduated from Saddam University for Islamic Studies. Ba’thist policy during this period explicitly ordered that “the graduates of the religious colleges be placed [in the mosques and religious institutions].” The regime’s documents also made the reasons of such policies unambiguous. In short, these graduates could be trusted “in light of the close evaluation [they have undergone] to assess their loyalty to the Party and the revolution.” The policy of populating Iraq’s religious institutions with regime loyalists was accompanied by its inverse, namely that “absolutely no permission is to be given to sermon-givers who are not officially licensed to give sermons in mosques.” To be officially

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414 These parentheses are original. The document defines hakimiyaa as the “ politicization of religion .”

licensed, one had to “obtain permission from the security services and the Party.” This process was designed to establish the “intellectual integrity” (i.e. adherence to Ba‘thist interpretations of Islam) of religious leaders and insure that they had a “political background similar to other important [state] employees.”

As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, the regime tirelessly enforced these policies until its demise in 2003.

Such policies clearly establish the link between the availability of Ba‘thized religious scholars and the Faith Campaign’s goal of spreading Islam. In that sense the role of Saddam University for Islamic Studies and similar institutions should not be understated. Not only did they provide a cohort of scholars who had been through strict background checks and passed numerous ideological hurdles, these institutions were also a means of tracking students after they graduated. The university’s administrators and security service personnel continued to monitor graduates, and maintained lists of scholars that they trusted. When the regime needed Islamic leaders for a new project associated with the Faith Campaign, these institutions would send lists of former students to the Ba‘th Party Secretariat, noting those who could be trusted – or in the regime’s jargon, those who possessed “intellectual integrity” – and those who did not.

Of course, the students’ mere presence in these schools meant that they had already cleared a rigorous background check. Therefore, it is not surprising that most of them were deemed trustworthy. However, the various institutes and universities would sometimes change their opinions about some students during the process of their studies. For example, one list of former students compiled in 1996 contained 957 names of students who had “intellectual integrity.”

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416 “Important and Special Suggestions on the Position of Men of Religion and those who have been endorsed by the Meeting of the Comrades of the Secretariat of the Leadership of the Branches included under the Tanzims of Provinces of the Central Region.” BRCC, 3559_0001 (0163-4). Undated but probably from 1992.
integrity” and a separate list of 65 students who did not. The 65 students who did not pass muster were then prevented from holding any position in the religious sphere.417

Changes in the Religious Landscape

These new institutions for Islamic studies that Saddam had created transformed Iraq’s religious landscape in several ways. Clearly, they altered the political ideology of the religious leadership in the country. However, the changes did not end there. The regime detested many of the “traditional” students who had previously pursued Islamic education at higher levels. In 1992, the president of Saddam University for Islamic Studies bemoaned the fact that ninety percent of the university’s applicants came from students in the religious studies system, rather than the secular state schools. He maintained that it was obvious to everyone that students from this system were inferior. Those who pursued religious studies, he continued, generally came from the poorest and most undeveloped sectors of society. In his opinion, they did not meet the standards of students in other fields. Thus, under the guise of increasing the quality of students, he limited the number of these traditional students to a maximum of fifty percent of the student body.418 The remaining students would be required to have graduated from the modern, secular state schools.419

As such, Saddam University for Islamic Studies was not intended to empower the traditional religious class. The traditional class of Islamic leaders relied on a network of religious schools and mosques often found in the countryside or in urban slums. They dressed in non-western clothing and they continued to live according to tribal and religious customs.

417 “Lists of Names,” BRCC, 3134_0002 (0112), October 1996; For other lists of students see various files in: BRCC, 2868_0000 (0001-0010), 1995.
418 This pertained to Iraqi, not foreign students.
Conversely, the Ba‘th Party’s traditional center of support was in a newly urbanized middle class that had embraced a narrative of modernization. They dressed in western style clothing, and had been educated in secular state schools.\textsuperscript{420} The Ba‘thists often distrusted the traditionally minded students of religious schools. Therefore, the regime hoped to replace them with a new type of religious leaders, whom it deemed both more loyal and better able to meet the Ba‘thists’ political needs. These new graduates would come from the Ba‘th Party’s traditional centers of support in the urbanized middle class, but would have the religious pedigree that accompanied a degree from an Islamic university. Through such subtle shifts in policy, Ba‘thists were able to dress their supporters in the garb of traditional religious leaders and insert them into the religious sphere.

In that sense, one finds different types of religious leaders heading the regime’s Islamic institutions in the 1990s. In the 1980s, as detailed in earlier chapters, the regime often relied on Ba‘thists who possessed modern-secular educations. These officials often held an academic specialization in Islam or Islamic history, but they were not traditionally trained Islamic scholars. Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma‘ruf epitomized this phenomenon. He had received a secular education in Iraq and Germany, and was then appointed as the Secretary General of the Popular Islamic Conference in the early 1980s and the inaugural president of Saddam University for Islamic Studies later in the decade.\textsuperscript{421} Tellingly he wore a suit and no head-covering. In contrast, by the mid-1990s, one finds people like Abd al-Razzaq al-Sa‘adi and Abd al-Latif al-Humayyim – both of whom wore the garb of Islamic scholars and possessed more traditional Islamic educations – leading institutions such as the Popular Islamic Conference. By this period, the regime had Ba‘thized large portions of Iraq’s religious landscape as well as the educational institutions that

\textsuperscript{420} Davis, 180.
\textsuperscript{421} Bashshar ‘Awwad Ma‘ruf, Interview by author. Amman, Jordan. July 11, 2011. For more on his role as the secretary general of the conference, see: \textit{Waqaa‘ i‘ al-Mu’tamar al-Islami al-Sha‘bi al-Thani}. 
produced religious leaders. Therefore, it could present the Iraqi people with Ba’thized Islamic leaders who looked the part and had the background one expected of a religious authority. Yet, while the garb of these leaders may have changed, the Ba’thist interpretations of Islam that they preached – as will be demonstrated in the following chapters – did not undergo a fundamental change.

As next chapter will outline, not all Ba’thist intentions were met in the religious sphere. This was especially true in its dealings with the Shi’is. Yet as the following chapter will also demonstrate, the regime’s failures on some issues did not undermine its construction and maintenance of a religious deep state or the relationship of this religious deep state to the regime during the Faith Campaign of the 1990s. Indeed, the religious deep state was the foundation of Iraq’s religious policies in both Sunni and Shi‘i regions of Iraq. It remained so throughout the last decade of Ba’thist rule. It was the essential component upon which all other policies toward religion rested.
Chapter 9: The Regime and the Shi‘is in the 1990s

Not everything functioned according to Ba‘thist intentions. Importantly, the regime had designed institutions such as the Saddam University for Islamic Studies to be non-sectarian. The Ba‘thists hoped to construct a generic, Arab nationalist Islam that would unite the Sunnis and the Shi‘is. However, students at these institutions were almost exclusively Sunnis. Sunnis were already overrepresented among the regime’s top ranking religious officials. The fact that the new Islamic university and other similar institutions were producing almost exclusively Sunni scholars only furthered that trend and the Ba‘thist plans to unite all Arab Muslims in Iraq under a single interpretation of Islam largely failed. Whatever the regime’s intent, many Shi‘is interpreted its crackdown on the uprisings in southern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War as a sectarian act. The trauma of those events had a profound effect on Iraqi society. And although many Iraqi Shi‘is remained members of the Ba‘th Party at all levels, the events of 1991 bred discontent among many other Shi‘is. Furthermore, some pro-regime Sunnis viewed the uprisings a Shi‘i betrayal.

As discussed in Chapter 7, the regime did not adopt those views. In fact it actively fought such ideas and it attempted to curb the rising tide of sectarianism in Iraq during the 1990s. The regime’s records clearly reflect the Ba‘thists’ preference for seeing the world through a non-sectarian lens. The regime’s internal records rarely discuss events or people as either Sunni or Shi‘i. Openly anti-Shi‘i language is conspicuously absent in the Ba‘th Party’s archive during the 1990s and early 2000s. The sectarian Sunnis, who undoubtedly existed in the Party, clearly understood that they could not denounce Shi‘ism directly. As in earlier periods, they found ways to employ coded language and metaphors. They sometimes used harsh but not overtly sectarian language to describe Shi‘i institutions. For example, some Ba‘thist reports described Shi‘i
mosques and religious leaders as adhering to “obsolete” concepts or accused them of playing “a role in intellectual and psychological sabotage.” Such harsh language avoided explicit sectarianism, but it is clear that the authors had little love for the people, institutions, or traditions they described. Thus, some Sunni Ba’thists clearly either misunderstood or did not always agree with official Ba’thist doctrine on Shi’ism. And if one reads between the lines of Ba’thist reports, it is clear that despite its immense efforts, the regime struggled to quell such sectarian views among both Sunnis and Shi’is. The regime’s documents never explicitly state it, but the strings of anti-sectarian policies which the Ba’thists enacted in the 1990s would only have been necessary if sectarianism had become a problem. Furthermore, when one of Saddam’s closest advisors (and cousin) Ali Hassan al-Majid ordered Ba’thists to monitor and control Shi’is ceremonies “without expressing prejudice toward any Islamic ritual,” it was clear both that the regime had a policy of suppressing anti-Shi’i discourses among Ba’thists and that such discourses were prevalent enough – even within the Ba’th Party – that high-ranking regime officials felt the need to address them.

Nevertheless, the failure of the Ba’thists to unite Iraq’s Sunnis and Shi’is did not prevent the regime from working closely with the new generation of Shi’i religious leaders or from integrating them into the regime’s authoritarian structures. The regime’s policies in the 1980s had allowed it to gain a foothold within the Shi’i religious establishment and to implement a system of control. As in the Sunni areas of Iraq, this system was based on co-opting and coercing the Shi’i religious landscape to meet the Ba’thists’ political needs. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the regime had mapped the religious landscape of southern Iraq and marginalized many of its opponents. Then, the 1991 uprising provided an opportunity for the Ba’thists to eliminate

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422 Untitled, *BRCC*, 2982_0000 (0850-0851), June 29, 1996.
423 For the details of these anti-sectarian policies, see Chapter 7.
countless more Shi‘i religious leaders who they considered problematic. A 1992 United Nations report highlighted not only the decimation of the Shi‘i establishment during the 1980s, but also its dire situation in 1991. The report claimed that following the uprising, “virtually all” of Iraq’s Shi‘i clergy were “under arrest” or had “disappeared.” When Iraq’s Foreign Minister, Tariq ‘Aziz, was asked about the location of these men, he replied, “if they have been executed, I’m not going to apologize for this.”

By design, the religious leadership that survived these cataclysmic events included fewer scholars who were ideologically opposed to the regime. Furthermore, the regime’s brutal response to the uprising had instilled a sense of terror among the Shi‘is that would last until 2003. As a result, one finds Shi‘i religious leaders working closely with the regime and the security services throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

**Terror and Acquiescence**

Although the regime never again carried out repressive operations against the Shi‘i religious leadership on the scale that it had in 1991, the regime’s security services continued to act with uncompromising violence against any form of religious opposition. In the latter years of the decade, the regime executed several senior Shi‘i clerics. Two Ayatollahs were assassinated in

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427 See, for example, “Designation of a Mosque Imam.” And “Information,” *BRCC*, 2753_0000 (0073-0089), August-October, 1997. Examples involving higher ranking Shi‘i clerics will be discussed below.
1998. Then a year later, the regime killed Iraq’s senior most Shi’i authority, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, as well as two of his sons.  

Another persistent problem that the Ba’thists eliminated after the Gulf War was the existence of difficult to control marshes along the Iraq-Iran boarder. As discussed in Chapter 4, these marshes often sheltered Iraqi opposition and allowed for clandestine transit to and from Iran. In the early 1990s, Saddam ordered these marshes to be destroyed. With no concern for the ensuing ecological disaster or the destruction of the Marsh Arab’s ancient culture, the regime drained the wetlands, imposed an economic blockade, and continued to conduct deadly raids into the area. Much of the region became uninhabitable and many of its residents fled to Iran.  

The regime’s violent actions should not be minimized, and indeed, one could argue that violence played a larger role in the regime’s policies toward the Shi’is than it did toward the Sunnis. Yet, this violence must be understood in the overall context of the regime’s relationship to the Shi’i religious landscape. Violence was but one tool of many at the regime’s disposal and it was not the Ba’thists’ primary recourse.  

In post-2003 Iraq, it has become taboo for Shi’i Iraqis to discuss support from their community for Saddam’s regime. However, as Patrick Cockburn has noted, in rare moments of candor, some Shi’is will admit that even in Shi’i strongholds, one could not openly oppose the regime because “in many houses though not in all, there was a brother and a sister who was a Ba’thist.”  

The Ba’thists’ were particularly skillful at infiltrating the Najaf hawza, which for

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430 Cockburn, 107.
most of the 1990s, was primarily managed by two senior Shi‘i religious scholars – Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Ayatollah Muhamad Sadiq al-Sadr. One non-Ba‘thists student later described the regime’s success in penetrating the hawza during the 1990s: “The government sent a hundred to a hundred and fifty young security and intelligence officers to be students and teachers” in the hawza. Moreover, he explained, “some of those who had important jobs in [Muhamad Sadiq] al-Sadr’s office became students only after the uprising of 1991 and after al-Sadr himself became important. So many new and strange people were entering the hawza that we knew they were from the intelligence agencies.” Al-Sadr sometimes attempted to mitigate this invasion. He had several tricks to determine who was a truly committed student and who was a regime agent. For example, he would ask students to take off their turbans and unravel them. Then he would ask the students to rewrap them. The committed students knew how; the Ba‘thists did not.  

Nevertheless, al-Sadr and the other senior Shi‘i scholars were fighting a losing battle. The Ba‘thists had been inundating the hawza with Ba‘thists since the 1980s. The regime’s strength and persistence proved too much for independent religious scholars to resist. The innovative the tricks of al-Sadr and other senior Ayatollahs to counter the regime’s efforts in this regard never came close to eliminating Ba‘thist influences in – and to some extent, control over – the Shi‘i establishment. For every scholar who resisted the regime, there was one or two more who had succumbed to the regime’s combination of carrots and sticks. Indeed, the regime worked closely with Shi‘i religious scholars at all levels. By the mid-1990s, the Ba‘thists could count on the support of even the most senior Shi‘i authorities. Some of the most authoritative Shi‘i scholars would even issue written fatwas in compliance with secret regime requests and then work with

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431 Cockburn, 95.
the regime to conceal the fact that the edict was at the behest of the Ba‘thists. As will be demonstrated below and in the following chapters, the Ba‘thists used these scholars to monitor and control less cooperative elements in the Shi‘i religious landscape.

**The Authoritarian Context of the Regime’s Policies toward the Shi‘is**

Because in the 1990s the regime maintained considerable control over Shi‘i scholars and institutions, it was free to act differently than it had in previous decades. The assassination of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr in 1999 is telling in that regard.

In the early 1980s, the Ba‘thists had assassinated Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr’s relative Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. The regime killed Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr as part of an open insurrection which had accompanied, and was largely backed by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In such a context, the regime felt threatened and was willing to carry out a protracted counter-insurgency campaign to deal with the reaction to Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr’s death.

No similar threat against the regime existed in the 1990s. One might ask, therefore, why the regime would risk sparking an insurgency by assassinating Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. The simple answer that the regime’s documents suggest is that, unlike in the 1980s, the regime felt its control over the Shi‘i religious landscape would permit it to kill the senior Shi‘i authority in Iraq without suffering the consequences it had feared in the 1980s. In that sense, it is useful to compare Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr’s situation in the 1990s with that of Ayatollah al-Khu‘i in the 1980s. In the 1980s, the regime had considered exiling or even killing al-Khu‘i. However, the Ba‘thists feared that doing so would not only kindle anti-regime violence, it would also destroy the Najaf seminaries and would, therefore, eliminate an important institution which the regime

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432 For a case that will shock many, see: “Issuing of a Fatwa,” *BRCC*, 028-5-1 (0583-5), May 19, 1997. For more details, see below.

433 Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr’s father was the brother of Muhamad Sadiq al-Sadr’s grandfather.
hoped to employ for its own benefit. One might assume that the regime would have had similar concerns in the case of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr in the late 1990s. Yet, by the late 1990s, the regime’s relationship to the Shi’i religious landscape had transformed dramatically. The regime enjoyed closer ties to and more control over Shi‘i institutions and religious leaders. As such, the regime did not risk losing the Shi‘i seminaries by killing Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. He was important, but other senior Ayatollahs in southern Iraq had succumbed to the regime’s authoritarian measures. Consequently, other, more cooperative scholars could replace him.\footnote{See: “Issuing of a Fatwa,” \textit{BRCC}, 028-5-1 (0583-5), May 19, 1997.} By the late 1990s, the regime could also use these co-opted Shi‘i scholars to prevent the violent reactions that could potentially result from al-Sadr’s death. Thus, in the late 1990s, the regime was free to deal with Sadr in a way that it could not have dealt with al-Khu‘i during the early 1980s.

One can clearly see the results of this changing context in the wake of al-Sadr’s assassination in 1999. After killing al-Sadr, the regime was able to activate its networks of co-opted Shi‘i religious leaders to create serious doubts over Ba‘thist culpability in al-Sadr’s death. Even a decade after the fall of Saddam’s regime, some prominent Shi‘is were still unsure if the regime was to blame or if some rival Shi‘i faction had carried out the assassination. Most notably – and all too conveniently for the Ba‘thists – some Shi‘is blamed the regime’s nemesis Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim for al-Sadr’s death.\footnote{Rashid al-Khayyun, \textit{100 ‘am min al-Islam al-Siyasi bi-l-‘Iraq}, vol. 1-al-Shi‘a, 185.} The Ba‘thists were particularly adept at employing their influence in the main Shi‘i mosques to deflect criticism. In addition to hinting at the Hakim family’s culpability, several prominent Shi‘i scholars blamed Israel for the assassination during their sermons. A commonly repeated story was that al-Sadr had predicted his own martyrdom and that he knew Israel would be behind it. Some quietist scholars simply
encouraged an end to strife or encouraged unity. Others explicitly finished their sermons with a call for “long life and victory” for Saddam.\textsuperscript{436}

In mosques with less cooperative sermon-givers, the regime employed a network of spies and informants to quickly and quietly crush any potential unrest.\textsuperscript{437} And when resistance to the regime did manifest among the religious leadership, the regime could rely on other senior scholars to counter it. For example after al-Sadr’s assassination, other senior Shi’i scholars informed the regime when and where his son, Muqtada, planned to hold prayers in remembrance of his father. As such, the regime crushed these potentially dangerous events before they even began.\textsuperscript{438} The regime had more difficulty dealing with Iraqi Shi’is who lived in Iran and who had strong followings in Iraq.\textsuperscript{439} In some cases violence did break out. For example, in the days after the assassination, one finds reports of demonstrators marching toward local Ba’th Party headquarters. In such instances, the Ba’thists opened fired on the marches, killing some, injuring many, and quickly dispersing the crowds.\textsuperscript{440} The combination of violence and cunning that the regime employed allowed it to prevent potential disturbances from escalating into a real threat.

Accordingly, it is clear that theories about the regime’s loss of control in the Shi’i districts of southern Iraq have been overstated. This fact is also evident in Lisa Blaydes’ study of the regime’s school registers in the years following the 1991 uprising. The Ba’thists maintained meticulous records, noting each student’s political ideology.\textsuperscript{441} Counterintuitively Blaydes finds that, “students living in the Shi’a south were uniformly Ba’thists.” As such, the registers show

\textsuperscript{436} “Friday Prayer,” \textit{BRCC}, 2348\_0000 (0482-0483), April 4, 1999; and: “Information,” \textit{BRCC}, 2348\_0000 (0552), February 22, 1999. The co-optation of senior Shi’i scholars and the resulting relationship between the regime and the Shi’is religious leadership will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 11.

\textsuperscript{437} See for example this exchange: “Information,” \textit{BRCC}, 2348\_0000 (0450), May 8, 1999; “Information,” \textit{BRCC}, 2348\_0000 (0451), May 18, 1999; As well as: “Information,” \textit{BRCC}, 2348\_0000 (0338), June 28, 1999.

\textsuperscript{438} “Information,” \textit{BRCC}, 2348\_0000 (0338), June 28, 1999.

\textsuperscript{439} “Information,” \textit{BRCC}, 2348\_0000 (0465), April 24, 1999.

\textsuperscript{440} “Information,” \textit{BRCC}, 2348\_0000 (0557), February 22, 1999.

\textsuperscript{441} It is of course possible that Ba’thist officials doctored these documents to show that their areas were under control, but it is impossible to know.
much higher levels of support for the Ba’th Party in the Shi’i south than in the Sunni Arab regions with the exception of Saddam’s hometown of Tikrit. Blaydes concludes that the high level of support among the Shi’i students in the registers did not result from loyalty to the regime. Instead, she argues, “Shi’a Iraqis would seek to avoid all public forms of political resistance given the severe uncertainties to life and livelihood associated with even small acts of non-compliance, particularly following the 1991 Shi’a and Kurdish uprisings and associated crackdown on Shi’a dissent.” Thus, in Blaydes’ view, the high levels of support for the Ba’th Party that the school registers recorded among the Shi’is were not due to affinity, but rather fear. The Sunni Arabs, on the other hand, were less afraid to list themselves as non-Ba’thists. This theory would suggest that the regime maintained control over the Shi’i areas. If the regime had indeed lost control, the students would not have felt the need to express their loyalty to the Ba’th Party.

Blaydes does not mention it, but one needs also to consider the possibility that the regime officials responsible for Shi’i areas did not want to give the impression that they were not in control of the local populations. Therefore, they could have simply reported everyone as a Ba’thists even if the students had claimed otherwise. While this is a reasonable suggestion, it is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, the regime files contain an abundance reporting on unpleasant realities. As mentioned elsewhere, this can most likely be attributed to the system of checks and overlapping security that Saddam put into place. Second, as mentioned above, there is independent evidence that Shi’is were afraid to speak against the regime openly because they feared that other Shi’is would report them. Therefore, it would not be too much of a stretch to

443 Cockburn, 107.
assume that these same Shi‘is were afraid to list themselves as non-Ba‘thists. Accordingly, if Blaydes’s thesis is valid, the fear she reports among Iraqi Shi‘is was most likely rooted in a system of regime agents and informers within the Shi‘i community itself.

**Shi‘i Commemorations in the 1990s**

Another important indicator of the regime’s control over southern Iraq was its ability to maintain calm during the Shi‘i holy month of Muharram. This does not imply the absence of disobedience. The archives contain numerous reports on, and arrests of Shi‘i Iraqis who attempted to perform the pilgrimages of Muharram by marching on foot – something which Saddam wished to eliminate. Some Shi‘i Iraqis continued to perform the pilgrimages on foot as means of political protest. Others claimed that they misinterpreted the regime’s policies. One Shi‘i later recalled that in 1993 after Saddam declared the Faith Campaign, he thought that open signs of piety such as making a pilgrimage on foot would be welcomed.

Yet the regime continued to view any form of mass assembly, including religious pilgrimages, as a potential threat. The regime devised coercive and sometimes elaborate measures to counter these pilgrimages. The Shi‘i who had misinterpreted the Faith Campaign to be an invitation to make a pilgrimage on foot was quickly arrested. He spent half a year in the security office of the Ba‘th Party’s Karbala Headquarters, where he was brutally tortured. The regime also employed more subtle means to suppress the pilgrimages. Saddam’s cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid, seems to have taken particular pleasure in concocting such plans. In one instance, he ordered a detachment of Party members to watch roads which marchers had illegally

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444 For numerous reports on this topic spanning several years, see the BRCC files: 3134_0002, and 3190-0003.
used in the past. Members of the Party would approach the groups who tried to march on foot and explain that the practice did not constitute true Islam, but rather a “reprehensible Persian innovation which benefits the enemies.” While doing so, the Ba’thists would make a list of the marchers’ names. Another Ba’thist who owned a taxi would be called to return them to their homes. The marchers would be unaware that the taxi driver was a Ba’thists who worked for the regime. The driver would discretely write down the marchers’ addresses. Finally, the report stipulated that, “the driver of the car should listen to them and create a report about their reactions [to being stopped by the Party].” In doing so the Ba’thists hoped to discover “who among them [were] truly dedicated to the great country of Iraq.”

For those who failed to meet expectations, the repercussions could be harsh. In the mid-1990s, the Muharram ceremonies were further complicated by Saddam’s decision to allow Iranians to begin making pilgrimages to Iraq’s holy cities. The decision was intended to be a goodwill gesture, but it brought the danger of Iranian agents potentially inciting Iraqis to rise up against the Ba’thists. Iraq’s Directorate of Military Intelligence (al-istikhbarat al-‘askariyya) responded by creating a detailed security plan designed to counter the threat and even to recruit Iranian spies. The regime coordinated its operations through two secret intelligence centers – one in Najaf, and one in Karbala. Iraqi Military Intelligence used these centers “to build relations with the owners of all shops, restaurants, cafes, and hotels near the shrines of the Imams.” Regime agents worked with the hotel owners in the two cities “in order to slip our elements in with [the Iranians] to analyze and target the beneficial elements for our work and prepare them for recruitment.” Then the regime’s agents would use “rewards, interests, public benefit, threatening and blackmail” to recruit spies. Iraqi Military Intelligence also

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established “secret coordination with the Ministry of Religious Endowments” to install its agents “as tourist and religious guides for groups [making the pilgrimage].”

Through such tactics, the regime largely prevented potentially problematic Muharram ceremonies from ballooning into a real threat. As Aaron Faust has noted, “party reports about the Shi‘i Muharram activities show that the regime succeeded in keeping them under control and even benefiting from them at times. By 1989, the practices had almost ceased completely, and although they saw a brief uptick in 1996 and a few other points in the late 1990s, they otherwise never again seriously threatened the regime as they did in the 1970s.”

Interestingly, the regime’s policies toward the Shi‘is during the 1990s demonstrated a remarkable ideological consistency with earlier decades. Despite the violent events of 1991, the regime soon reverted back to its policies from the previous decade. In fact, with the exception of a few months following the Gulf Crisis, the regime’s strategy toward Shi‘i institutions and religious leaders remained remarkably consistent throughout Saddam’s presidency. The main difference in the regime’s records between the 1980s and the 1990s was not the regime’s policies, but its perception of success in implementing those policies. In the 1980s, the regime had begun to co-opt Shi‘i religious leaders, but as detailed in Chapters 4, it was a difficult and often violent process. Regime reports from the early to mid-1980s express some reservation about the Shi‘i religious leadership and whether it could be trusted. Chapter 4 highlighted subtle increases throughout the 1980s in the regime’s ability to implement its policies during the

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449 Faust, 188.
450 For a detailed comparison between the regime’s policies toward the Shi‘is in the 1980s and 1990s, see, Abbas Kadhim, “The Hawza Under Siege, 11. Kadhim argues that a comparison of regime documents on cases ranging from the early 1980s to the late 1990s demonstrates “similarities in the language, the assessment of the threat, and the response by the Ba‘th Party” with regard to the Shi‘is. It should be noted that Amatzia Baram claims that an evolution in the regime’s policies toward these events occurred. He bases this assertion on his discovery of a CRRC documents from 2002. However, the BRCC files contain scores of similar documents that outline similar plans dating back to the early 1980s. The CRRC document that Baram cites is therefore misleading if not put into the context of the numerous BRCC documents. See Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, 249.
Muharram commemorations. By the 1990s, the regime regularly worked with Shi‘i religious leaders and appeared confident that these Shi‘i authorities would support Ba‘thist plans. Again, one sees this subtly reflected in the regime’s documents. For example, Party plans during Muharram in the 1990s state that Ba‘thists would work with the Shi‘i men of religion “as we have been doing.”

Party officials also seemed confident that Shi‘i religious leaders would instill “a refusal to surrender and strengthen the patience and steadfastness of the citizens.” In doing so, the regime hoped that Iraqis could better deal with the punishing economic situation that accompanied international sanctions following the 1991 Gulf War.

The Ba‘thists themselves tracked changes to official policies concerning the month of Muharram. From the late 1980s through the 1990s, only minor adjustments were implemented. In one example of a change, the regime’s official policy had been to create television programs and publish newspapers articles that dealt “with the subject of the martyrdom of [Imam] Hussein” as well as “heroism, sacrifice, and redemption.” In 1991, the regime made a slight modification in that these programs and articles should tie those subjects to the 1991 Gulf War. The regime also decided that the state should prevent state employees from taking part in marches. Such minor alterations reveal no signs of a major ideological shift.

Following the 1991 uprisings, the Ba‘th Party also created emergency plans for its local offices. These were designed to prevent or, if need be, suppress similar events in the future. Local Party officials enacted the plans for one or two days around the ‘Ashura on the 10th day of Muharram. The plans consisted of a heightened state of readiness, increased patrols, etc...

453 Untitled, BRCC, 3134_0002 (0195-0196), 1990s.
However, these emergency plans did not represent a change in the regime’s attitude toward the Muharram festivals. Rather, they were meant to reinforce existing procedures.

Throughout the 1990s, the regime worked to limit Shi’i marches, to identify and neutralize potentially threatening elements in southern Iraq, and to educate the people and Party members on the Ba’th Party’s positive view of Islam. As it had done since the early 1980s, the regime continued to emphasize the need to “intensify awareness and cultural indoctrination of the Party apparatuses on the topics of religion, heritage, and the religious-political phenomenon.”

This indoctrination also continued to emphasize traditional Ba’thist principles. There were no sign of a turn toward Islamism. For example, Party plans during the month of Muharram often include instructions to exploit people’s nationalist sentiments and use them to gain cooperation against the Persians and harmful political parties.

The Party held special “lectures on religion, heritage, and the [deplorable] religious-political phenomenon for all the students of the colleges and institutes of the country as well as lessons on patriotic (wataniyya) culture, and nationalism (qawmiyya) in the universities.”

This nationalistic, anti-Islamist language was identical to that of earlier Party plans which the regime had developed throughout Saddam’s presidency.

Thus, while the Ba’thists’ approach toward Shi’i religious leaders did not differ significantly with regard to ideology in the 1990s, the regime’s records demonstrate that its relationship to the Shi’i religious landscape had altered significantly. Through two decades of authoritarian rule – culminating in the extreme violence of 1991 – the regime had worked to eliminate hostile elements in the Shi’i religious establishment and to co-opt Shi’i scholars at all levels. By the 1990s these policies had a clear effect. The Shi’is became part of the religious

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455 “A Study on the Phenomenon of Marching,” BRCC, 3134_0002 (0089-0091), November 11, 1996.
deep state in Iraq. Consequently, as will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, the regime was able to rely on the Shi‘i establishment to further Saddam’s political goals and to maintain calm in southern Iraq.
Chapter 10: Mechanisms of Control

The creation of a religious deep state in Iraq proved immensely valuable to the regime. Essential to the process of creating it was constructing a means to monitor, control, and ultimately maintain it. This was no easy task. As in its other strategies, the regime employed a combination of violence, manipulation, and cunning to maintain its control over Iraq’s religious landscape in the 1990s and early 2000s. First and foremost, the regime used its security apparatuses to monitor religious leaders and punish those who fell short of Ba’thist expectations. But the security forces were only one of many means that the regime employed to manage the religious landscape during the Faith Campaign. As important were the ever-increasing institutionalization and bureaucratization of the religious sphere, which provided the regime with new means of monitoring and regulating religious leaders. Finally, the regime also controlled religious leaders and religious discourse in Iraq by increasingly controlling the spaces that these leaders and their discourses operated – namely the mosques and other places of worship in Iraq. This chapter will address all these topics, and in doing so, it will provide an outline of the regime’s mechanisms of control over Iraq’s religious landscape during the Faith Campaign of the 1990s and early 2000s. Later, Chapter 12 will demonstrate how this control was essential for the proliferation state sponsored religion in Iraq.

Religion and State Security Apparatuses in the 1990s

In the 1990s, international sanctions devastated Iraq’s traditional, uniformed security forces in the military and police. However, Saddam’s control over Iraq was not rooted in these traditional forces. While the Army crumbled under international sanctions, the overall size of Iraqi security
forces – and the role they played in controlling Iraqi society – increased considerably in the 1990s. The regime relied on paramilitary and Ba’th Party militias as well as a ballooning cadre of covert security agents. Unlike a professional Army or police force, these security personnel were largely hidden from public view. They did not wear uniforms and their identities were kept secret.

With limited resources at its disposal, the regime also needed to decide where it would focus its efforts. Following the overthrow of the Iraqi regime in 2003, Saddam’s cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid, told his interrogators that in 1990s, the regime had concentrated more on controlling the domestic population, rather than on external threats. 458 Other senior Iraqi officers in the military and security services confirmed this assertion. A declassified U.S. government report on the interrogations states that Iraqis “had to contend with at least five major security organizations: the Special Security Office, the Iraqi Intelligence Service, the Directorate of General Security, the General Directorate of Military Intelligence and various ‘security service’ offices within the Republican Guard’s bureaucracy.” The report continues, “Moreover, the number of security personnel in each of these organizations increased dramatically after 1991. In many cases, new spies were sent to units to report on the spies already there, even those from their own organization.” 459

Within this domestic focus, the regime’s security services were particularly interested in the religious sphere. Thus, Saddam restructured them to deal with religious issues more effectively. The Special Security Organization (jihaz al-‘amn al-khass) 460 was a particularly

460 The Arabic term “jihaz” is normally translated as “apparatus,” but in the English literature on Iraqi security services, “jihaz al-‘amn al-khass” is most often translated as “Special Security Organization” and abbreviated as SSO. Thus, I have done the same here.
formidable organization in that regard. Created by Saddam in the early 1980s, its mission was to control the other security services and the Ba'ath Party itself.\textsuperscript{461} In other words, it spied on the spies, and controlled those tasked with controlling Iraq. During the 1990s, the organization paid particularly close attention to religious matters. In the summer of 1993, just as Saddam announced the Faith Campaign, the Special Security Organization (SSO) formulated a plan to “Double the activities of the Party organizations to seize the initiative in the religious sphere [especially] in the religious colleges, institutes, and schools.” It kept detailed “inventories” on all Party members who operated in the religious sphere. The SSO paid close attention to Ba’thists who worked as Qur’an readers, imams, and servants in the mosques to make sure, in its words, that they were “serving the march of the Party and [Ba'hist] revolution.”\textsuperscript{462}

The SSO was particularly concerned with preventing Islamists from influencing these Ba’thists or other officers in the various security services. For example, one finds reports highlighting the SSO’s concern that “hostile activities in mosques and places of worship” were negatively influencing Party members.\textsuperscript{463} The regime worked quickly to counter such threats.

Other regime intelligence agencies dealt with similar threats in their own areas of responsibility. For example, one finds reports from Iraqi Military Intelligence (\textit{al-istikhbarat al-‘askariyya}) on Iraqi soldiers who participated in religious ceremonies with suspected Wahhabis.\textsuperscript{464} Again, the regime security apparatuses quickly dealt with the issue. They also worked with the local Party branches to eliminate various Islamist movements and replace them

\textsuperscript{461} For more on the Special Security Organization, see: Sassoon, \textit{Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party}, 98-112.

\textsuperscript{462} “Information,” \textit{BRCC}, 2696_0002 (0755-0757), September 5, 1993.


with what the regime termed “Islam and Arabism” (i.e. Ba‘thized religious leaders preaching Ba‘thist interpretations of Islam).465

The regime possessed a highly developed doctrine for dealing with the opposition in general, and hostile religious groups in particular. Members of the security services received in-depth instruction on methods to “strategically infiltrate” the opposition, and to develop “quality sources” among opposition members. Having permeated these circles, Ba‘thist agents learned, as one training manual put it, various tactics to “widen differences between Iraqi opposition members in order to create doubts and a more frustrating situation among their members as well as to incapacitate them by using highly effective and secret intelligence techniques.”466

When these more subtle tactics failed, the regime was not above employing violence. As such, throughout the 1990s, one finds reports of the regime’s security services executing both Sunni and Shi‘i religious leaders. In 1994, for example, the regime targeted the Sunni religious leadership in a wave of arrests and executions throughout the Sunni Arab districts of Fallujah, Ramadi, Mosul, and Baghdad.467 A year later, in 1995, an Iraqi general-turned-Islamist named Muhammad Mazlum al-Dulaymi attempted to assassinate Saddam. The Dulaym tribe is the largest Sunni Arab tribe and it was closely linked to the regime. Hence, the confrontation that resulted from the attempted assassination sent shockwaves through the Sunni Arab establishment. Several religious leaders were arrested. Most analyses at the time portrayed this as a tribal conflict.468 That depiction is only partially true. Muhammad Mazlum al-Dulaymi was extremely religious, and eventually developed Islamist sympathies. It was these religious beliefs

468 Davis, 234.
that led to the attempt on Saddam’s life.\textsuperscript{469} Afterword, Saddam’s crackdown on the would-be assassin’s family sparked a broader tribal uprising. Thus, the conflict was originally over religion, rather than tribal affiliation. Nevertheless, the event clearly signaled to the regime how problematic religious views could lead to large scale destabilization and even threaten Ba'athist rule. As discussed in Chapter 9, the regime also maintained a campaign of what the United Nations termed the “systematic suppression” of the Shi‘i religious leadership.\textsuperscript{470}

It is clear, then, that the regime responded violently to any hint of resistance. However, the security services were not simply reactive. They also took proactive steps to prevent any such activities. For example, in homogeneous areas where a single sect or tribe existed, the SSO would bring in outsiders to work in the religious sphere. In doing so, it hoped to mitigate tribal or sectarian loyalty and prevent any potential collaboration against the regime.\textsuperscript{471} SSO agents would also “infiltrate” the Party leadership in potentially problematic areas of the country.\textsuperscript{472}

Throughout the 1990s, the regime fine-tuned the organization of its security services to meet the threat posed by various Islamist organizations. It created special branches to monitor the Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabi networks, and various Shi‘i Islamists.\textsuperscript{473} In the early 1990s, the regime tasked its oldest internal security service, referred to simply as General Security \textit{[al-\text{amn al-‘amm]} with developing a department that would “specialize in religious issues and pursue the activities of men of religion”\textsuperscript{474} In 1997, the Iraqi Intelligence Service \textit{(jihaz al-}

\textsuperscript{469} Interview with former Iraqi Major General, May 11, 2012.
\textsuperscript{472} Untitled, \textit{BRCC}, 2696_0002 (0766), August 28, 1993.
\textsuperscript{473} Interview with former Iraqi Major General, who had worked in intelligence during this period, May 11, 2012.
\textsuperscript{474} “Important and Special Suggestions on the Position of Men of Religion and those who have been endorsed by the Meeting of the Comrades of the Secretariat of the Leadership of the Branches included under the Tanzims of Provinces of the Central Region.” \textit{BRCC}, 3559_0001 (0163-4). Undated but probably from 1992.
mukhabarat) overhauled its “Hostile Activity Directorate.” This directorate was responsible for countering Iraq’s domestic opposition. The 1997 reform added sections specifically devoted to “religious parties” and to neutralizing sectarianism. It also increased the operational budget for missions that countered these religious parties by 60 percent.475

Furthermore, the SSO worked with the Party and the Ministry of Culture and Information to create counter propaganda targeting various Islamist movements. For example, the regime published a book entitled “The True Wahhabi Movement and its Roots” and distributed it to all Party branches. As of September 1993, it had circulated 10,000 copies.476 Elsewhere, the Iraqi state archives preserved a similar (possibly the same?) book, entitled “The Birth of the Wahhabi Movement and its Historic Roots.” This book was in circulation in 2002. Such studies were inundated with conspiracies and offered only a superficial rendition of religious thought, creed, or theology. “The Birth of the Wahhabi Movement and its Historic Roots” was written by a Colonel in the Iraqi Intelligence Service. He was not a religious leader. The book attempted to delegitimize Wahhabism by linking it to Western imperialism, and – in the most damning insult that the Ba’thist could muster – by claiming that its leaders were Jewish. Indeed, the book claimed Muhammad bin Saud – the 18th century founder of the first Saudi State – was “of Jewish descent.” It also asserted that Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab – the 18th century founder of Wahhabism – came from a line of secret Jews, who maintained “one fake Muslim name, and one original Jewish name.” Thus, although it was commonly believed that ibn abd al-Wahhab’s grandfather was named “Sulayman,” his real name according to the book was “Schulman.”477

As the sources discussed in this section demonstrate, the regime was never able to eliminate the Islamist opposition. Indeed, the proliferation of activities against them suggests that the regime was engaged in constant conflict with an Islamist opposition. Moreover, Party officials and security services often identified and worked to restrict “unauthorized” mosques and sermon-givers who “practice religious extremism.” Regime officials also regularly encountered anti-Ba‘thist propaganda and illegal radio broadcasts by Shi‘i Islamists. The Da‘wa Party and other organized Shi‘i opposition movements continued to be a menace. Furthermore, as in the 1980s, insurgent attacks were not uncommon. On finds examples of plain-clothed insurgents, sometimes dressed as women, suddenly opening fire on members of the Ba‘th Party or the security services.

Nevertheless, these sources also make clear that the Ba‘thists never abandoned this fight. They did not, as many assumed, recede into the background or cede the field to independent or Islamist religious actors.

Formalization of Committees and Control

Contrary to the theory that the regime ceded religious affairs to independent or grass roots Islamic leaders in the 1990s, the Ba‘th Party’s records demonstrate a pattern of increasing control over both Sunni and Shi‘i religious leaders. Even with a religious deep state largely in place, the regime did not feel comfortable employing it without significant oversight. Most

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478 “Information,” BRCC, 2348_0000 (0567), February 17, 1999.
479 See for example: “Hostile Publication” 2688_0002 (0009), BRCC, December 29, 1993.
481 Untitled, 2178_0001 (0635), BRCC, July 15, 1995.
notably it formalized official religious committees at the provincial level. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Ba'thists had formed religious committees at the local level in the early 1980s. The regime used them to regulate sermons and other activities at mosques throughout the country. During the 1980s, these committees were often ad-hoc. As such, the regime tasked low-ranking local officials with convening them. It seems that these local officials would only involve higher authorities if they encountered a problem.

The local committees continued to meet in the 1990s. Their primary role remained to oversee the appointment of local religious leaders. The regime also required that these committees work with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs to approve all religious sermons. In 1995, the regime formalized these committees on the provincial level as well. The Ba'th Party Secretariat instructed the Party branches to form standing committees consisting of the secretary general of the Party branch (which in most cases was in charge of a province), the chief security manager of the province, and the manager of religious endowments for the province. Thus, decisions related to religion would now involve much higher ranking officials than had been the case with the local committees. The provincial committees assessed men of religion in regular meetings and kept the national Party Secretariat updated on all developments.

The regime considered both the local and provincial committees to be politically sensitive and essential to its security. The committees carefully assessed all religious leaders in their areas of responsibility, recording their political outlooks, if they had any problematic incidents in their past, and whether anyone in their family was suspected of disloyalty to the regime. Tellingly, the

forms that the committees used in these assessments were similar to those used in background checks for all sensitive government positions.\textsuperscript{484}

In 1997, the regime modified the mandate of the committees. According to the 1995 directive, the provincial standing committees were not required to meet with the men of religion in their areas. They simply had to conduct assessments. They could complete these assessments using the records of the security services, the Party, and the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. The 1997 directive modified this mandate, stating that because of the importance of the issue of religion, the committees now needed to hold symposiums with the men of religion in their area every three months.\textsuperscript{485}

Throughout the 1980s, the Ba'thists had developed a cadre of Party members who specialized in religious matters. These specially trained Ba'thists facilitated the efforts of religious committees, both at the provincial level and within the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. Therefore, the officials who worked in religious institutions often overlapped with those who served on regime committees tasked with monitoring those institutions.\textsuperscript{486} Interestingly, officials on these committees were sometimes female. Hence, female Ba’thists were tasked with overseeing male religious leaders and deciding the appropriateness of their sermons.\textsuperscript{487}

As with other sectors of Iraqi society, the regime not only spied on the population, but also spied on its spies. Thus, the regime developed various methods for monitoring these religious committees and those who served on them. When the Party branches nominated a

\textsuperscript{484} For numerous reports of this type see: BRCC, 2753-0000 (0178-677). They are all from 1995.
\textsuperscript{485} “Assessment,” BRCC, 2753-0000 (0093), September 9, 1997.
\textsuperscript{486} For example, see the case of an Assistant Dean of Saddam College for Imams and Sermon-Givers who is assigned to work on one of the oversight committees: “Party Committees,” BRCC, 3496_0001 (0056), October 19, 2000.
\textsuperscript{487} “Party Committees,” BRCC, 3496_0001 (0009), April 30, 2002. It should be noted that the female referenced here was eventually dismissed due to “weakness.”
Ba’thist to serve on a religious committee, the branch was required to fill out the “form for special information” on him or her. This was the same form used to conduct background investigations for all sensitive postings within the regime.\textsuperscript{488} The regime conducted these investigations on all committee members, even senior Ba’thists such as the head of a Party division (\textit{firqa}),\textsuperscript{489} who would have already held considerable responsibility.\textsuperscript{490} To further control these committees, the regime also limited the period of time that one could serve on them.\textsuperscript{491}

\textbf{A Strategy of Maintaining Rather than Gaining Control}

These religious committees were tasked with the “normal” functioning of the religious sphere such as approving routine sermons and appointing local religious leaders. However, they did not possess unfettered control over these issues. In some cases the security services presented these committees with a \textit{fait accompli}. For example, when members of the security services suspected a sermon-giver of having ties to Islamists or other opposition groups, they would remove him. Often the security services would immediately replace the sermon-giver with someone else.\textsuperscript{492} Consequently, the security services had considerable influence in shaping Iraq’s religious landscape.

The security services’ quick replacement of religious leaders in the mosques marked an important shift in the regime’s strategy for controlling religious discourse in the country. In the

\textsuperscript{488} “Party Committees,” \textit{BRCC}, 3496_0001 (0004), May 26, 2002.
\textsuperscript{489} Divisions were part of the basic Ba’th Party hierarchy. The Party was divided into Branches, which were further divided into units, and then once more into divisions. Heading a division took well over a decade of stellar service. The position came with considerable responsibility and authority. For more on the Party structure, see: Sassoon, \textit{Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party}, 46-7.
\textsuperscript{490} “Party Committees,” \textit{BRCC}, 3496_0001 (0007), May 7, 2002.
\textsuperscript{491} I have been unable to determine exactly how long these limits were, but one finds cases of Ba’thists being removed from the committees after exceeding the time restrictions. See: “Party Committees,” \textit{BRCC}, 3496_0001 (0064), September 17, 2000.
\textsuperscript{492} “Nominating an Imam,” \textit{BRCC}, 2753-0000 (0029), January 20, 1998.
early 1980s, it should be recalled, the regime was primarily concerned with cleansing the religious landscape of hostile religious leaders. It did this through placing strict limitations on who could work as a sermon-giver. These policies left numerous mosques without any leadership. When Iraqis asked the Ba’thists to ease their restrictions so that each mosque would have a sermon-giver, the regime refused. During that period, the regime trusted very few religious leaders. The regime simply did not know who they were or what they believed. In such a context, an empty mosque was not very problematic. A mosque without a sermon-giver was vulnerable to exploitation by opposition members, but so was a mosque with an un-vetted – and possibly hostile – sermon-giver. So, the regime faced a choice between allowing un-vetted sermon-givers to preach in mosques and taking the chance that an opposition sermon-giver would exploit a leaderless mosque. The risk was basically the same.

In the 1990s, the cost-benefit analysis of the regime’s actions in the religious sphere had completely transformed. After a decade of working to bring Iraq’s religious landscape under its control, most religious leaders operated within the regime’s authoritarian system. Therefore, in the 1990s, the Ba’thists’ strategy was not to gain control, but rather to maintain it. Under such conditions, the regime had a considerable incentive to ensure that every mosque had an official sermon-giver. If a mosque was left without a sermon-giver, it could be exploited by the opposition. However, unlike in the 1980s, this would be a net loss for the regime.

In fact, leaderless mosque in the 1990s had the potential to undo the system that the regime had worked so diligently to put in place. Unsurprisingly, the Ba’thists devoted considerable time and resources to mitigating this threat. The regime considered mosques to be particularly vulnerable during periods of transition. Therefore, in the 1990s – and unlike in the 1980s – if a sermon-giver was arrested or transferred to another mosque, the security services
would always emphasize the need for an immediate replacement so as “not to give the opportunity for suspicious elements to exploit the mosque.” Along these lines, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the regime not only wished to assign an official sermon-giver to each mosque, but also to make sure that he was continuously present at the mosque – again, to ensure that unauthorized individuals could not stand up and deliver un-vetted sermons. Thus, one often finds instances of the security services removing a sermon-giver because “he is not present at the mosque except one or two days a week and his absence has given birth to a state of competition between the those attending the mosque to pray as to who should lead the prayers.” For a regime that wished to completely control religious discourse, such a situation was unacceptable.

**Formalized Surveillance**

The regime’s focus on maintaining control over the religious landscape in the 1990s led to intensified and increasingly institutionalized surveillance of religious leaders. During this period, regime officials spoke of “ongoing and rotating assessments of every man of religion and sermon-giver to ensure that all of them are supporters of the march of the Party and the revolution.”

In addition to these regular assessments, the regime conducted a national “inventory” (jard) of religious leaders in 1992, 1995, and 1998. In these inventories, the Party Secretariat

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495 “Activities that were taken by the Comrades Officials of the Tanzims about the Hostile Activities in Mosques,” *BRCC*, 2696_0002 (0723-0724). Early 1990s. Party branches also submitted monthly status reports to the Party Secretariat that included a category titled “the Religious Phenomenon.” Items within this category were universally negative. In fact, some branches used the term “Deviants,” in place of “Religious Phenomenon,” suggesting that both that they bought into Ba’hist interpretations of Islam, and that any deviation from it was inherently problematic. See for example: “The Security Stance for the Month of December 1998,” *BRCC*, 037-3-4 (0093), December 1998.
496 It is possible that other inventories were also conducted, but I was only able to find these. For the 1992 inventory, see: *BRCC*, 3199_0002, 1992; For 1995, see: *BRCC*, 2753_0000, 1995; and for 1998, see: *BRCC*, 2249-0000, 1998.
asked each branch to survey the religious leaders in its territory. The branches were to provide clear judgments of each religious leader’s ideas, and what he discussed both during his sermons and in his conversations with those who attended the prayers. The regime often provided documents for the local branches to fill out. The religious leaders were to be classified as either: Ba’thists; Independent Nationalists (watani mustaqill); or Not Cooperative/No Good. Their sermons were to be judged in accordance with: Soundness of Creed (i.e. that they adhered to Ba’thist interpretations of Islam and that they were not Islamists, Wahhabis, or Salafists497); Agreement with the Party and the Revolution on political/policy matters; and that they mention Saddam.498 The Party Secretariat asked the branches to make special note of “men of religion from religious trends (salafiya, wahabbiya, and Muslim Brotherhood).”499 The Ba’thists kept close track of Shi’i Islamists as well. In some cases, they were also interested in Sufis and the owners of alms houses (sing: takiyah).500

As is evident from the above, the target of these inventories was Iraq’s Muslim majority. However, in some limited cases, similar inventories were also conducted on Christians. These normally occurred in response to a specific threat. For example in 1996, the regime felt that

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497 That “creed” referred to Ba’thists interpretations of Islam rather than traditional Islamic creeds is clear from the infractions that various religious leaders are accused of in the inventories. For example, under the category of “soundness of creed” religious leaders were listed as “no good” because they were Wahhabis. See “Evaluation of Men of Religion,” BRCC, 2753-0000 (0374), no date, but probably 1995. No religious leaders were accused of not adhering to a particular Islamic creed in the traditional sense. See below for more details on specific accusations.

498 See: Untitled, BRCC, 2753_0000 (0371), October 1, 1995; and: “Assessment,” BRCC, 2753_0000 (0374), September 2, 1995.


500 “Inventory,” BRCC, 3199_0002 (0017), July 30, 1992. The regime’s view of Sufis was not as clear-cut as it was toward other groups. At times, the regime described some Sufi orders as completely non-political and it therefore largely left them alone. However, the manner in which the regime saw specific Sufi orders was often misunderstood by outside analysts. For example, Amatzia Baram portrays the Kasnazaniyya order as having close ties to the regime because the Ba’thists considered it to be non-political. Yet, the regime’s internal records demonstrate that the Ba’thists felt the movement’s principles contradicted those of the Party. Ultimately, the Ba’th Party assessed that it was a “political movement under the cover of a Sufi order...” and the regime attempted to dissuade Iraqis from joining it. See, “A study on the Religious Movements and the Men of Religion,” BRCC, 3559_0001 (0064-0067) August 1, 1992.
“sectarian” elements of the Christian community in the north were working with the “American-Zionist Intelligence Service.” Thus, it ordered the Party branches to conduct an inventory of the Christians in their areas and to determine if they had family members in the north or outside the country. If so, the branches were ordered to carefully monitor the movements of these Christians.\footnote{Untitled, \textit{BRCC}, 2982-0000 (0794), July 18, 1996.}

The regime not only used these inventories to track potential threats, it also made sure to identify individuals who might be useful. The Party branches noted any influential religious leader who was a Ba‘hist or who they felt could potentially be helpful. For example, the Party Secretariat specifically asked for the names of students in the Najaf \textit{hawza} who were Ba‘hist or who had a Ba‘hist family member. The names of these individuals were forwarded to the Directorate of General Security, to make sure that they were being utilized to the fullest extent possible.\footnote{Untitled, \textit{BRCC}, 2249-0000 (0004), December 5, 1998.}

A great deal can be learned from these inventories. First, it is clear that throughout the 1990s, the regime was never as concerned with religious knowledge as much as it was with political loyalty. Religious leaders were never categorized by their piety, level of knowledge, or the quality of their sermons. The regime was only interested in whether they were politically loyal or hostile. Another clear trend that emerges from these inventories is one of overwhelming regime control. Even in what were thought to be Shi‘i strongholds and bastions of independence,\footnote{See for example the reports from Karbala: 1998 Inventory, \textit{BRCC}, 2249-0000 (0029).} it was quite rare for a religious leader to openly dissent from the regime’s official positions. As mentioned above, Aaron Faust calculated that in 1995, only seventy out of 1,501 religious leaders in the Iraq had any negative notation next to their names. Of course, one must account for the possibility that regime officials, for one reason or another, did not always
wish to report the truth. Yet, it should also be emphasized that the regime had an ever deepening system of monitoring not only the citizenry, but also the Party and security services themselves. Attempting to present false information to the Party Secretariat was, therefore, a precarious task. Moreover, the Ba'thists conducting these inventories were not shy about reporting negative information. Therefore, it can be assumed that the inventories offer an imperfect, but possible representation of the religious landscape.

The negative notations that religious leaders received next to their names in the inventories were wide-ranging. They provide a glimpse into the regime’s outlook. As such, they are worth recounting in detail. Of course, it was always bad to be labeled an Islamist. The inventories had various names for this. Sometimes they specified that a religious leader was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, or a follower of Sadr. There were also numerous examples of Wahhabis and salafis – terms which the regime used interchangeably – and even members of Turkmen Islamic parties. Sometimes the labels were less specific. For instance, some religious leaders were listed as puritanical (mutazammit), or extremist. Others labels were even more ambiguous. Sometimes “supporters” of the Party were said to “suspect” somebody of being an Islamist. Some religious leaders were said to be “shaky” or “inconsistent” in their view of the Party. The regime also worried about religious practices which contained what the regime considered to be either Islamist or sectarian elements. Thus, one finds reports about religious ceremonies that were not practiced in “their proper way.”

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504 Yet, even if we take this precaution into consideration, one can assume that these numbers at least represent the regime’s perception, which is still very important. After all, the regime formed its policies based on these perceptions.
505 1992 Inventory, BRCC, 3199_0002 (0169, 0190, 0282).
506 1998 Inventory, BRCC, 2249_0000 (0023, 0036-0043); And: 1992 Inventory, BRCC, 3199_0002 (0193).
507 1992 Inventory, BRCC, 3199_0002 (0001).
Often, regime officials included additional derogatory information, for example, specifying not only that religious leaders were Muslim Brothers, but that they had studied in Saudi Arabia. One sermon-giver was reported to be “spiteful” of the Ba’th Party and had called for an Islamic state. Others were said to be sectarian, or to have created discord (*fitnah*). The regime officials conducting these inventories also noted former sermon-givers in the area who had problematic histories, even if they were no longer actively preaching. One Islamic scholar was said to have been a sermon-giver previously but the regime arrested him “due to excess in one of his sermons.” Another was said to have fled with the Afghan Mujahidin. Thus, even though no specific threat remained, the Ba’thists were on the lookout for remnants of these former sermon-givers’ hostile ideas.

Having a family member who was suspected of opposing the regime could also get one into trouble. The inventories noted that although a man held a positive view of the Party, his son had been killed due to involvement in acts of “sabotage and treachery.” Such cases were particularly prevalent among the Shi‘is. If someone had a family member associated with the Da’wa Party, he would be suspect. In many of these cases, the results of the inventories were sent directly to the security services so that they could deal with the religious leaders who failed to meet the regime’s standards.

As mentioned above, these inventories were also useful in identifying religious leaders who supported the Party. This information was valuable to the regime, especially if the religious leaders were influential. The regime did not have any derogatory information on the vast majority of religious leaders. Supporters of the Ba’th Party were also quite common, but most

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509 His current status was unclear: 1992 Inventory, *BRCC*, 3199_0002 (0193).
510 1992 Inventory, *BRCC*, 3199_0002 (0309).
511 1992 Inventory, *BRCC*, 3199_0002 (0168, 0454).
men of religion were listed as “independent” or “independent nationalists.” Of these independents, the regime often attempted to identify potential supporters. The most common positive notation was simply that he was “good.” Another popular description was that “his speech and sermons are consistent with the principles of the Party.” These descriptions seem to imply that the sermon-giver was at least not causing trouble. Other widely used notations implied more active support. For example the inventories stated that numerous religious leaders “cooperate with the Party.” Interestingly, just as one’s family could be held against him, having family members who supported the regime was viewed positively. Thus the inventories noted when independent sermon-givers and scholars had close family members who were committed Ba’thists.513

These descriptions go on for hundreds of pages and cover thousands of Islamic leaders. This small sample should make clear that the regime never moved toward Islamism or even cared much for piety. Contrary to the idea that the regime shifted toward Islamism after the Gulf War, these inventories demonstrate – both in their scope and their content – that the regime continued to distrust anything that even slightly resembled religious fundamentalism or political Islam. Loyalty to the Ba’th Party and the regime were the only measures that mattered in Saddam’s Iraq, even in the 1990s.

Beyond Surveillance

The inventories that the regime conducted in the 1990s provided a glut of information on Iraq’s religious landscape. They helped Saddam to identify problematic regions and to promptly address them. However, mass inventories were an imperfect system of surveillance. Sermon-givers were acutely aware that the regime was monitoring them. They learned to adhere to

513 1992 Inventory, BRCC, 3199_0002 (0198).

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Ba‘thist prescriptions in their public sermons. On one hand, this was a significant victory for the regime. Suppressing certain ideas by preventing them from entering public discourse was one of Saddam’s most important goals. Yet, on the other hand, it was not a complete victory. Those same sermon-givers who adhered to Ba‘thist stipulations in public sermons could lead their followers astray in private. Such details were difficult to discern in a project as large and resource-intensive as the national inventories. Unlike other, more limited operations dealing with religion, the scale of the inventories required mass participation from Ba‘thists. Thus, the regime could not limit its operations to those Ba‘thists who were specially trained to deal with religious matters.

In some cases, the Ba‘thists tasked with monitoring sermons were completely inept. For example, salafis are often defined not only by their beliefs, but also by their appearance.⁵¹⁴ Most notably, they grow long beards and wear short version of the dishdashah (the one-piece, often white robe traditionally worn by Arab men). However, as one salafi-leaning sermon-giver would later recount, “everyone knew who they [the Ba‘thists] were because they were the ones wearing short dishdashas but on their faces they had only mustaches.”⁵¹⁵

The regime employed several tactics to mitigate this problem. Most prominently it was always on the lookout for ways to infiltrate various Islamist and oppositionist circles. In one case, a junior Ba‘thist reported to his superiors that he had spoken with a Wahhabi and that the Wahhabi had given him some books and expressed his beliefs. Higher ranking Ba‘thists instructed their junior colleague to follow-up with the Wahhabi on the matters they had discussed and to win his trust. Then they put him under the supervision of the Directorate of General Security in the hope that he could infiltrate Wahhabi circles as a regime spy. The regime even

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⁵¹⁴ For a discussion of this, see, Bonnefoy, 48-9.
⁵¹⁵ Stevenson, 193.
offered the young Ba‘thist a monthly salary for his work.\footnote{\textit{\textquotedblleft Coordination," BRCC, 2348\_0000 (0643), November 30, 1998.}} One finds similar examples among the Shi‘is. The archives have preserved cases of Ba‘thists who made a point of frequenting mosques in poor Shi‘i districts of Baghdad. One report stated that “through these visits” a Ba‘thist “was able to establish positive relations with a number of worshipers who have negative influence.” From the information that the Ba‘thist gathered, he was able to publish a report on “hostile religious tendencies.”\footnote{Untitled. \textit{BRCC}, 037\_3\_4 (0411), June 29, 1999.}

These more aggressive efforts were often able to overcome the limitations inherent in the large and unwieldy nationwide inventories. For example, in 1998, one of the provincial standing committees for religious affairs convened to consider the reappointment of sermon-givers. One case was particularly telling. At first the sermon-giver in question seemed like a strong candidate for reappointment. Initial reports described him as a Ba‘thist. The regime had conducted regular reviews of his sermons throughout the 1990s and had not uncovered any derogatory information. Agents who had visited his mosque reported that he mentioned Saddam in his sermons, that he maintained a sound creed, and that his stance toward the Party was as it should be. Moreover, his family was described as “very good.”\footnote{\textit{\textquotedblleft Reappointment," BRCC, 2753\_0000 (0008), January 28, 1998.}} However, before approving his reappointment, the committee checked to see if there were any other reports on him. As it turns out, there were. A Ba‘thist agent had gone undercover in 1996. He had won the sermon-giver’s trust and managed to speak with him in private. In doing so, he discovered that when the sermon-giver was away from the prying eyes of the regime, he expressed sectarian views and even declared those he disagreed with to be apostates.\footnote{In Arabic the word the reports use is “\textit{takfir.”}} In typical Ba‘thist fashion, the report suggested that the
sermon-giver was “infected with a mental condition that causes him to be unnatural and to lose evenhandedness.” His reappointment was denied.

Building New Mosques

Thus far, this chapter has focused on the regime’s attempt to influence religious discourse in Iraq through controlling religious leaders. In addition to managing people, however, the regime also made a concerted effort to control the space in which religious discourse took place – most prominently, the mosques. As mentioned in earlier sections, the regime’s strategy was to place all existing mosques under the management of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. However, Saddam also sponsored a large campaign to build new mosques. He was the benefactor of numerous mosques and shrines in the 1980s, but the bulk of Iraq’s new mosques were constructed during the Faith Campaign of the 1990s. These projects had an enormous effect on the religious landscape of Iraq. In the mid-20th century, the ratio of mosques to Iraqis was roughly one for every 37,000. By the 1990s, that ratio had increased to one mosque for every 3,500 Iraqis. Though the regime directly financed the building of some grand mosques (which will be discussed in Chapter 12), many of these mosques were built by “ordinary” Iraqis.

Saddam depicted the flurry of mosque building as proof of his commitment to Islam. He often said that any citizen could build a mosque in his area of residence. The regime even held conferences and symposiums during the Faith Campaign to highlight its efforts in this regard. The Western press also noted the proliferation of mosques, calling it “The most visible part of

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520 “Reappointment,” BRCC, 2753_0000 (0012), August 12, 1996.
the [faith] campaign.”\textsuperscript{523} Often Western media coverage simply regurgitated the regime’s hyperbole. The New York Times, for example, reported that “Mosque building … has become Mr. Hussein’s grand obsession.” The Times also repeated Iraqi assertions that this project was “on a scale that no Arab leader has undertaken since the days of the great Abbasid caliphs.”\textsuperscript{524} Saddam depicted this “obsession” as a benevolent act meant to spread and strengthen the free practice of religion in the country. However, the regime’s records reveal that despite Saddam’s assertions to the contrary, the freedom to build mosques in Iraq was a mirage. The construction of new mosques was tightly controlled. Indeed controlling who could build mosques was an important means for the regime to exert control over the religious landscape and to stifle any independent manifestations of religion. In that sense the proliferation of mosques was simply another brick in the regime’s authoritarian system.

The relationship between the Faith Campaign and the proliferation of mosques is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the Faith Campaign was sometimes invoked not to build mosques, but rather to destroy them. For example in 1996, the regime discovered a number of unsanctioned mosques in a poor Shi’i district of Baghdad. Officials in the Ba’th Party and the security services averred that the opposition was likely “exploiting” them for political ends. The Party Secretariat ordered local Ba’thists to bring all of the mosques under the management of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, and also to “limit the number” of mosques in the area. This limiting of mosques was to be done “in accordance with [the guidance of] the leadership of the Struggler Comrade Leader Saddam Hussein (may God preserve and guide him)

for the Faith Campaign.” Hence, in this example, the regime invoked the Faith Campaign to suppress religious expression and destroy mosques. Accordingly, the campaign is better understood as a tool of power rather than a strategy to spread religion for its own sake.525

Despite Saddam’s supposedly magnanimous declarations, the regime maintained tight control over who could build mosques and where they could build them. The Ba’thists swiftly dealt with anyone who attempted to build a mosque without permission.526 These controls were not only applied to new mosques. If one wished to tear down and rebuild or even to rename a mosque, the regime’s approval was required.527 Iraqis seeking permission to build a mosque underwent an intense background check similar to that of applicants to sensitive positions within the regime. This process was the same for both Sunnis and Shi’is. It normally took about a month, though in some cases, where contradictory information emerged, it could last significantly longer.528

To build, re-build, or rename a mosque, one needed to file a request with the local representatives of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. One had to provide not only the proposed name and location of the mosque, but also the details of one’s political background and finances. Ministry officials then forwarded this information to the Ba’th Party Secretariat. The Secretariat would assign the local Party branches and the security services to conduct a thorough investigation. Following the investigations, all the information would be sent back to the Party Secretariat, which would decide whether to approve the request. The Party would forward its decision to the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, which would

525 Untitled. BRCC, 2982_0000 (0850-0851), June 29, 1996.
527 For changing the name see: “Changing of the Name of the Mosque.” BRCC, 2834_0001 (0593), May 6, 1997; For rebuilding, see: “Statement of Opinion,” BRCC, 3844_0000 (0671-0679), April – Oct 2002.
inform the applicant. Consequently, someone applying to build a mosque would only interact with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. In an attempt to project a civil façade onto its authoritarian structures, the regime was careful not to give any indication that the Party or the security services were involved in the decision.

The regime would deny permission to build a mosque for numerous reasons. Sometimes officials would simply decide that “the area does not need another mosque.” Therefore, they would reject the application. More often, ideological considerations existed. If the regime’s investigations revealed that someone was an Islamist or was suspected of having ties to Islamists, the application would be denied. As with other assessments of political loyalty, one could come up short due to the actions or sympathies of ones relatives. For example, one Iraqi was denied permission to build a mosque because of his two sons. One son had fled to Saudi Arabia during the 1991 uprising and only returned as a result of a general amnesty. The other remained a fugitive.

The regime disapproved applications to build mosques for less nefarious reasons as well. One investigation revealed that an applicant “did not donate to the building of schools.” He was therefore not sufficiently committed to assisting the regime and his application was denied. One’s influence was also taken into consideration. However, influence cut both ways. Someone who possessed considerable influence could be either a greater threat or conversely a greater asset. Accordingly, the regime enthusiastically approved applications of Iraqis who possessed

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530 For example, see: “Statement of Opinion,” *BRCC*, 3844_0000 (0022), December 29, 2002.
“large influence in the area” if they were deemed “cooperative” and “no negative information” had surfaced during the investigations.\textsuperscript{533}

When reviewing an application to build a mosque, the regime considered the applicant’s finances to be as important as his ideology. The system which the regime had implemented was designed to control the mosques through ensuring that their owners were loyal to Saddam and the Ba‘thist regime. If one did not possess the financial resources to build and maintain the mosque, the regime feared that others, who had not been through the extensive vetting process, would step in to help. This was problematic because these un-vetted individuals would undoubtedly influence the mosque, and thus religious discourse in Iraq.

As such, the regime inquired about the applicant’s finances in all investigations connected to building mosques. The local Ba‘thists and security services were required to include this information – whether positive or negative – in the report they sent back to the Party Secretariat. The regime denied applicants who lacked the financial resources to carry out the project even if no other derogatory information about them emerged in the investigations. Sometimes, the regime made this decision even if the applicant felt that he could afford the mosque. For example, one otherwise unproblematic Iraqi was retired. In his retirement he wished to build and run a local mosque. He owned a house which was split into two sections. He lived in one half and leased the other to make money. The investigators felt that the property would not provide enough to maintain a mosque, and subsequently the Party Secretariat denied his request.\textsuperscript{534}

The regime was especially careful not to grant permission for mosques which had financing from someone outside the country, and who was, therefore, outside of its control. One

\textsuperscript{533} “Building of an Alms House (takiyah),” \textit{BRCC}, 2834\_0001 (0028), December 11, 1997.
report describes a man who was said to have “good morals,” which in Ba’thist discourse meant that he was loyal to Saddam and the regime. However, during their investigation, local Ba’thists had learned that “one of his relatives is an expatriate outside Iraq, and that he will assist him in building the mosque.” It should be noted that the reports did not indicate that this expatriate relative was the primary financier. This was still unacceptable. The application was rejected without further thought.535

Some Iraqis attempted to circumvent the problem of financing through communal fundraising. This was also problematic for the Ba’thists because they would have had difficulty tracking the financiers. Furthermore, it would be unclear who to hold responsible if the mosque was used for hostile activity. Thus, one finds rejections that stated someone wished to “rely on fundraising, and that is not permitted at the current time.”536

Communal funding of a mosque was also problematic in that the regime relied on Iraq’s political economy to ensure that mosques did not fall into the wrong hands. During the 1990s, crippling international sanctions had devastated the Iraqi economy. There were ubiquitous reports of ordinary Iraqis “selling their gold and furniture,” and of poor families who were “giving children to orphanages.” Some Iraqis were even reported to be “selling their internal organs for hard currency.”537 Yet, as others have pointed out, those with connections to the regime were able not only to maintain their status, but to flourish. In fact a new class emerged for whom “money [was] no object.”538 Anyone who possessed enough resources to finance a mosque was usually tied to the regime. As a result, requiring that one must finance the project

536 “Statement of Opinion,” BRCC, 3844_0000 (0467), November 18, 2002.
individually – rather than communally – was simply another means of ensuring that the mosque would not fall into the wrong hands.

The cases mentioned thus far refer to Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims who wished to build mosques. It should be noted, however, that Christians who wished to build Churches and other religious structures went through the same process. Comparing and contrasting the experiences of Iraqi Christians with that of their Muslim counterparts reveals a great deal about the nature of the regime in religious matters. First, and most strikingly, the mechanics of the process for a Christian to build a Church were exactly the same as for a Muslim to build a mosque. A request was made with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. The ministry forwarded the application to the Ba‘th Party Secretariat. The Secretariat would then oversee an investigation and conclude whether or not to approve the project. In the regime’s records, one even finds the files on churches intermixed with the files on mosques. Thus, officially the regime did not distinguish between churches and mosques. However, sifting through the regime’s files, it quickly becomes apparent that the regime rarely approved Christian requests to build churches.539 Sometimes the regime’s official response differed in tone among the various Christian communities. Requests from the Assyrian community, which had a history of nationalist agitation, or the Protestants with their strong ties to the West, were rejected rather bluntly. The Ba‘thists gave the Armenians, who posed no political threat in Iraq, a gentler response – namely that the church they had was sufficient, and therefore the regime would like to “delay” granting permission for a new one.540 No matter the nicety of the language, the answer was still “no.”

539 I found no instances of a request to build a church being approved. However, it is possible that such examples do exist elsewhere in the archive and public documents from the period suggest that new churches were built. See, Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, 263.
These instances depict a clear bias in the regime’s attitude toward Christians. However, these rejections are also telling in what they do not say. Not a single file on the requests to build Churches mentions Islam or Muslims. Instead, the regime continued to rely on the principles of Ba’thism, which downplayed religious differences. If the regime had turned to Islam or Islamism as some academic treatments of Iraq suggest, one would expect that this would be a clear case in which to observe the transition. The regime could have easily referred to the Christians as protected religious minority (dhimmi) which, in traditional understandings of Islamic law, would not be permitted to build new churches. Or, more mildly, the regime could have simply claimed that it did not wish to harm the sentiments of local Muslims. Yet both the local Ba’thist investigators and the Party Secretariat provided strictly secular justifications for their rejections. Most commonly they stated that the existing church was adequate and that there was no need for a new one, or that there were already enough churches in the area. As mentioned above, the regime often employed the same language and reasoning when rejecting a Muslim’s request to build mosque.\footnote{“Building of a Mosque,” BRCC, 2834_0001 (0576), May 12, 1997.} The regime continued to use this logic and language even into the final year of Saddam’s rule.\footnote{See, for example: “Statement of Opinion,” BRCC, 3844_0000 (0417-0423), September 11, 2002; “Statement of Opinion,” BRCC, 3844_0000 (049), November 15, 2002; and: “Building a Church,” BRCC, 2834_0001 (0535), July 13, 1997.} Thus, while there is clear evidence of \textit{de facto} bias in the regime’s actions, there is no sign of \textit{de jure} discrimination against Christians or official Islamization of the regime’s policies.
Chapter 11: Authoritarian Religious Life

As should be abundantly clear at this point, the Ba‘thist regime in Iraq spent a great deal of time and effort attempting to shape the religious landscape. However, religious leaders were not simply objects of the regime’s policies. The manner in which these scholars reacted and interacted with the regime’s policies was very important to the nature of the religious deep state and thus to the regime’s ability to propagate religion.

To survive, religious leaders had to learn to adapt to layers of security and strict lines delineating acceptable and unacceptable ideas. Many religious scholars learned not only to survive but also to use the system to their benefit. Others learned very difficult lessons about the necessity of blind submission to power, even if the nature of the power they confronted seemed incomprehensible. Interestingly, as this chapter will also detail, the interaction between the religious landscape and the regime produced certain illusions with regard to the relationship between religion and state during the Faith Campaign. Often, these illusions were not happenstance. They were intentional. Nevertheless, they have often misled outside analysts and have distorted the historiography of Iraq.

A Kafkaesque Existence

The previous chapters have detailed an authoritarian system which was more or less effective. Indeed, there is little sign that Iraq would have reformed in any meaningful way or that the regime would have fallen had it not been for the events of 2003. Nevertheless, while the above arguments may at times give the appearance of a well-organized and well-managed security state, such a depiction is incorrect. The Iraqi security system was often chaotic and contradictory.
However, congruence or coherence should not be confused with effectiveness. At times the incoherence of the system appears to have made it even more effective. Religious scholars never knew when the system would target them or why. The resulting chaos was crippling, and it frightened most Iraqis into docile submission. Many sermon-givers and religious scholars undoubtedly attempted to avoid the state security apparatuses, to steer clear of national politics, and to live as normal a life as they could manage. Unfortunately, these seemingly mundane goals were not always possible in Saddam’s Iraq.

One major problem facing Iraq’s religious leaders was that the multiple layers of security and the numerous security checks did not always coordinate smoothly. In one instance, the Ba‘th Party had approved groups of students to begin their training to become teachers. Later the state security services – which conducted separate investigations – disapproved of the students. Such situations often led to confusion. Administrative officials expected to receive one answer: approved or disapproved. Instead they received two contradictory responses and thus faced a serious dilemma. Would they admit students who the security services had disapproved, or would they deny students after the Ba‘th Party had explicitly stated they would be permitted to study? Either action could result in severe punishment.\(^543\)

These problems were intensified in the religious sphere because the regime considered everything associated with Islam to be even more sensitive. The additional restrictions which the regime imposed on all religious matters could sometimes become quite burdensome. For example, the president of Saddam University for Islamic Studies noted in 2001 that “our university applies special controls in making appointments.” But he complained that the multi-

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stage security check which was at the center of these special controls took too long. It impeded the university from hiring necessary administrative staff in a timely manner.  

The security checks and secrecy surrounding all matters dealing with religion meant that one part of the regime sometimes had no idea what others were doing. For example, the regime often banned funeral processions because they presented an opportunity for Iraqis to gather and potentially demonstrate against the government. However, sometimes, when it was beneficial, the regime would organize funeral processions – especially for children – to demonstrate the negative effects of sanctions. These processions were organized secretly, so as to give the appearance of spontaneous anti-Western demonstrations. The regime’s archives show that often the extreme secrecy involved meant that even high ranking security officials did not know that the processions were sanctioned, and indeed created, by the regime. As Aaron Faust aptly notes, these events revealed “how difficult it was, even for members of the regime’s upper echelons, to determine fact from fiction and ritual from reality in Hussein’s Iraq.”

This confusion often had severe consequences for religious scholars. In one case from 1997, a group of Sunni imams from al-Anbar Province had been banned from preaching and thus had been unemployed since 1995. In Iraq at that time, even those who worked suffered greatly. To lose one’s job was to be condemned to destitution. The imams petitioned Saddam to reverse the verdict. As a result of the petition, the regime conducted an investigation. One imam was subsequently informed that he had never been banned from preaching. This was news to him. He had been unemployed for two years without knowing why or that he could re-apply for

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544 “Nomination to be Designated in a Vacant Position,” BRCC, 3246-0000 (0147), December 30, 2001.
545 Faust, 122.
546 See for example, Ayad Sham’un Bulos Butros, Shahadat Iraqiyya, Disk 1, Season 3, (Iraq Memory Foundation, Recorded January 20, 2007).
another position. He was caught in the authoritarian system, the arbitrariness of which had given him the impression that he was forbidden to work in the religious sphere.\(^\text{547}\)

Another case, which can only be described as Kafkaesque, pertinently highlights the disjointed, yet effective mechanics of the regime’s system of control. The case originated in 2001, when the regime was in the midst of a campaign to confront the Wahhabi movement. One local Ba‘thist official claimed that he met regularly with a wide range of imams and sermon-givers “for the purpose of cooperating and coordinating on the matter of fighting this malignant [Wahhabi] movement.” He had successfully met all men of religion in his region with the exception of one, who was not present at the mosque when the Ba‘thist official called on him. Later, the official sent another Ba‘thist to the mosque, and again the imam was not present. As discussed in Chapter 10, not being present in one’s mosque was a serious offence. The regime required religious leaders to be in their mosques to prevent unauthorized sermon-givers from exploiting their absence. The Ba‘thist official then ordered the imam to be brought in for questioning. The Ba‘thist also decided to ensure personally that the imam’s sermons were in accordance with the regime’s anti-Wahhabi campaign. Therefore, he instructed the imam to use certain, very specific language. This put the imam in a precarious situation, as he already had orders from the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs to use different language.

Usefully, the archives have preserved both the Ba‘thist’s and the imam’s statements about what occurred. In the imam’s telling of the events in question, he was “surprised” one evening to find two Party members entering the mosque. They brought him back to the local Party headquarters to speak with someone whom they said was important in the Party. This important man told the imam that he needed to speak out against the Wahhabi movement during

his Friday sermons. The imam answered that he already did so. But then the Ba‘thist told him that he must use specific expressions about the Wahhabi movement. The imam answered that he “did not have instruction from the Ministry of Endowments to use the expressions that he [the important Party official] stated.” The imam argued that he did not have authority to use this language and that “the book from the Ministry for religious guidance does not designate these expressions, which if used, could possibly reflect negatively on the imam and on security and stability.”

The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs maintained tight control over the content of sermons, and had the imam deviated, he would probably have been arrested by the security services. Thus, he was caught between two authorities, which were instructing him to do two different things. To obey one was to disobey the other. The imam decided to heed the orders of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, as he was probably accustomed to doing so and knew the punishment for disobeying. The Ba‘thist then arrested him and “forcibly” took him to the Party’s security department, where he was formally accused of not cooperating with Party apparatuses. The imam protested and even provided the instructions from the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. It was of no use. He was eventually released, but was prohibited from being an imam. Thus, he was left unemployed.\footnote{\textit{“Imam and Sermon-Giver of the Mosque,” BRCC, 3844_0000 (0261-0262), October 30, 2001. For the imam’s version of the events see: Untitled Letter from Imam to the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, \textit{BRCC}, 3844_0000 (0274-0275), August 26, 2001.}}

In a somewhat happy twist, a year later the imam petitioned the regime to be reinstated. After an extensive investigation and a close review of the incident, he was permitted to return to work. However, he had undoubtedly learned an important lesson: Men of religion did not have the liberty of thinking through problems or having orders make sense. They simply had to obey
the branch of the regime with which they were currently dealing. The system did not always work smoothly, but in the end, it crushed any resistance.\(^{549}\)

In addition to the multiple authorities present in Saddam’s Iraq, the issues of corruption and the influence of personal relationships added to the chaos. In one example, the head of a local Ba’th Party division (\textit{firqa}) accused a subordinate Ba’thist of practicing abnormal religious ceremonies and having a negative influence on the youth in his area. He reported this to the Party Secretariat in Baghdad. The Secretariat reported this information to Special Security Organization (SSO), which as mentioned in Chapter 10, was responsible for monitoring the Party. The SSO conducted an investigation and found the accused Ba’thist was innocent. It noted that the accused had a bad relationship with the head of the Party division, and that the division head had assaulted him the previous January. The SSO reported this to the Party Secretariat and stated that it had worked out an agreement between the two Party officials.

The Party Secretariat informed the headquarters of the Party branch (which was above a division in the Party hierarchy) of the SSO’s findings. However, the secretary-general of the branch responded that “there is no truth to the accusations of SSO. The head of the Party division has no relationship to the accused either in the past or present, and no assault took place last January because the two do not even live in the same area.” Then the Party branch reported that the member in question was indeed practicing abnormal religious ceremonies. The Party secretariat reported this back to the SSO, but no further information is given.\(^{550}\)

This incident makes clear that someone was either covering for someone else, or that personal relationships had interfered with Party practices. In a web of corruption and lies, it is impossible, even today, to reconstruct what actually occurred.


Of course, religious leaders were not simply victims. Many learned to live within the system and even to use it to their advantage. One Shi’i sermon-giver was not well liked by the local worshipers. They complained that his beard was unkempt and that he wore “civilian clothes,” such as a shirt and pants instead of the garb of a religious leader. They did not want to pray behind him. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs dismissed him. However, when the new sermon-giver arrived with the order from the Ministry, the old sermon-giver refused to accept it. A long argument ensued. The old sermon-giver had clearly been working with the security services, and decided to take matters into his own hands. He dug up some damaging information on the new sermon-giver and presented it to the security services with the intent of regaining his position. The new sermon-giver was indeed dismissed from the position. The old sermon-giver’s case was presented in front of a board in order to decide whether he could return to his old position. Unfortunately, the results are not given. Yet, it is clear that the sermon-giver knew how to use the system to his advantage.

Other religious leaders utilized the system in subtler ways. For example, when religious scholars wanted a new seminary or library, they learned to justify their requests in term of the Ba’thists’ broader political struggles against Iran, Israel, or the West. They learned to glorify Saddam. They learned what was forbidden and which subjects should not be discussed. And finally, they learned to use these to their benefit, and to the detriment of their rivals.

The Illusion of Independence

The fact that Iraqis, and especially Iraqi religious leaders, had learned to operate within and to some extent manipulate the regime’s authoritarian system significantly impacted the manner in

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which outsiders – who had no access to the internal workings of the regime – interpreted the relationship between the regime and the Iraqi religious landscape during the 1990s and early 2000s. If the regime’s sources are reliable, it largely succeeded in constructing and maintaining a religious deep state. Such a deep state is by its very nature concealed from outside observers. It allowed the regime to mask its control over the population by presenting its loyalists and agents as independent representatives of civil society. Accordingly, the regime’s increasing dominance over the religious sphere could sometimes give the appearance of its increased independence.

By the 1990s, the regime had managed to wear down many prominent religious scholars who had resisted Ba‘thists’ overtures in the 1980s. The regime’s methods of co-optation have been discussed in previous chapters and are by this point well known. They included torture, exile, and of course, execution. When necessary, the regime was not above applying these methods to the family members of dissident religious leaders. Therefore, fleeing the country was not always an attractive option. After enduring a decade of Saddam’s rule, and with its end nowhere in sight, many formerly independent preachers, imams, and even Ayatollahs appear to have simply given up their opposition. Some began to work for the regime actively.

Once a religious scholar had proved his loyalty, the Ba‘thists permitted him to travel and speak publicly. In some cases, this could give the impressions that the regime was loosening its restrictions.\(^{552}\) In fact, the opposite was true. Iraqi religious scholars were only permitted to speak so that they could spread Ba‘thist propaganda or otherwise support the regime. As Abbas Kadhim has noted, “pro-regime religious figures enjoyed a more generous margin of freedom to

\(^{552}\) For example, Amatzia Baram refers to “the relative leniency of the regime during the faith campaign.” Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, 277.
express their strong views, albeit in a calculated way.”  

Thus, a religious scholar’s ability to speak publically was not necessarily evidence that the regime had lost control over him.

The regime’s archives have preserved several examples of this phenomenon among both Sunni and Shi‘i scholars. The case of one senior Shi‘i cleric is telling. He had been a known supporter of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr in the 1970s, and the regime arrested him after it assassinated al-Sadr in 1980. Later in the decade, he was arrested again and brutally tortured. Yet, in the late 1990s, he was able to speak publicly and travel outside the country. He even participated in religious delegations traveling to Western countries. The Ba‘thists would never have permitted him to do so in the 1980s. Without any further information, an outside analyst might assume that the regime had loosened its restrictions on him. However, the archives reveal another explanation. By the mid-1990s, he had been completely co-opted and was actively working for the regime. When he traveled abroad, he did so as an agent of the regime. He was not – as the Ba‘thists attempted to portray him – an independent member of a religious delegation. Instead, he acted as a spy, reporting back to the regime on sensitive issues and sometimes even condemning his counterparts for disloyalty.

In one instance, he traveled to an important Western state. The purpose of the trip was to demonstrate to Western audiences – and Christian religious leaders – that Iraqis were suffering from what he termed an “American-Zionist attack.” After returning to Iraq, he met with regime officials. He claimed that the trip was successful. He was able to explain Iraq’s position to various Christian clergy, to the press, and to other officials. However, he demurred that the Iraqi ambassador in this particular state was not playing “any role in explaining the suffering of the

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554 In the following section, the names of Iraqi religious scholars and sometimes the sources on which I rely have been withheld to protect the identities of those involved.
Iraqi people.” Moreover, the ambassador was not at all interested in assisting the delegation’s “patriotic mission.”

The Director General of the Office of Party Secretariat in Baghdad was appalled. He sent a memo to Saddam explaining what had occurred. He insisted that the ambassador be removed from this sensitive post due to his obvious lack of “good morals.” The archives did not preserve the ambassador’s fate, but clearly the cleric put him in a precarious situation.

It is important to note that this was not a case of passive acquiescence to regime policies, or simply a lack of resistance. The senior Shi’i cleric could have remained quiet about his experience. After a decade of torture and imprisonment, the regime had wooed him with various incentives. These incentives were dependent on his providing such important details. Apparently the strategy worked. This was not an isolated case. In post 2003 Iraq, almost no senior religious leader wishes to be associated with Saddam’s brutal regime. However, many of those who now claim to have been dissidents were in fact actively supporting the regime (though the cleric’s case is also representative in the sense that religious leaders were often imprisoned or tortured before finally coming around). If the regime needed a religious fatwa, it could count on receiving one signed by the most senior scholars. And when resistance to the regime did manifest among the religious leadership, the regime could rely on other senior scholars to counter it. As discussed in Chapter 9, after the Ba‘thists executed Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr in 1999, other senior Shi’i scholars informed the regime when and where al-Sadr’s son, Muqtada, planned to hold prayers in remembrance of his father. As such, the regime crushed these potentially dangerous events before they even began. Some scholars supported the regime openly, and some did so secretly,

555 “Our travels to [withheld].” BRCC, 2348.0000 (0384), June 3, 1999.
but in the end almost everyone was compromised. Those who rebuffed the regime generally did
not survive or were forced into exile.

Some religious leaders have claimed that the Ba‘thists actively manipulated public
perceptions, making it difficult for outside observers to understand the true relationship between
the regime and the religious landscape. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr claimed that the regime had
feigned support for him to undermine his reputation. He argued that the Ba‘thists knew “anyone
they oppose will ascend socially and people will think well of him, while anyone they endorse
and praise, or at least look away from him, will descend socially and people will think ill of
him.” Therefore, al-Sadr insisted, the regime publicly attacked certain scholars so that their
reputation would improve, and it praised others whom the Ba‘thists actually opposed.558 Abbas
Kadhim has argued that this dynamic has led to a widespread misconception about the
relationship between Shi‘i scholars and the state.

      While it is far from definitive,559 some evidence for this phenomenon exists in the
Ba‘thist archive. In public during the 1990s, the regime appeared to promote Muhammad Sadiq
al-Sadr as an Arab alternative to Iranian born scholars such as al-Sadr’s predecessor, Ayatollah
al-Khu‘i. The regime even forced al-Khu‘i’s son, Taqi, to support al-Sadr’s candidacy.560
However, there is no evidence that al-Sadr was a party to these plans, and since usually Shi‘i
scholars – not the state – choose who they believe is the most learned, the extent of the regime’s
influence in al-Sadr’s rise remains unclear. Moreover, and despite this public endorsement,
behind closed doors, the regime worked to suppress al-Sadr and his followers. Conversely, Shi‘i Ayatollahs who were willing to support the regime, also worked with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs to conceal their cooperation. For example, when representatives from the Ministry asked a senior Ayatollah for two fatwas, the Ayatollah responded that he could issue one, but not the other. His reasoning for not issuing the second fatwa was that he had recently published a fatwa on the subject and if he were to reverse his stance, everyone would know that the regime had influenced him to do so. This would strip the fatwa of any authority and would undermine the standing of a senior Ayatollah who was willing to assist the regime. The Ba‘thists accepted this as an appropriate precaution, and only requested that he issue one fatwa.561

As a result, on one hand, scholars such as Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who were often hostile to the regime – even behind closed doors – were portrayed as somehow aligned with Saddam and the Ba‘thists.562 On the other hand, Shi‘i scholars who were willing to work with the regime were often seen as independent or even as opponents of the regime. Behind closed doors senior regime officials openly acknowledged this phenomenon. They recognized that if their support for a Shi‘i religious leader was discovered, it would lead to his delegitimization. As Saddam’s deputy, Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri put it, a Shi‘i religious leader would be “burnt as soon as he was recognized as a collaborator with the state and this will be the fate of anyone who works with the state.”563 Therefore, when the regime co-opted scholars, especially among the Shi‘is, it often worked to conceal its relationship to them. This approach performed two beneficial functions for the Ba‘thists. First, it allowed them to co-opt religious leaders more effectively. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, it created the illusion that independent religious

563 Quoted in, Kadhim, “The Hawza Under Siege, 27.
actors were supporting the regime’s initiatives. That was the ideal outcome of the process that the regime termed Ba’thification. The Ba’thists had managed to penetrate a segment of Iraqi society, in this case the religious sphere. Instead of destroying it, the Ba’thists infiltrated it, and then transformed it into an instrument of their regime’s authoritarian system. Yet, the Ba’thists did so while continuing to present it as an independent element of civil society.
Chapter 12: Putting the System to Work

As previous chapters have alluded, and as this chapter will make explicit, the Ba’thist Islam that Saddam wished to promote in Iraq deviated significantly from “traditional” interpretations of the religion. Consequently, if the regime wished to propagate its Ba’thist interpretations of Islam, it first needed to neutralize traditional religious leaders who might contradict Ba’thist assertions. The regime also needed to create institutions and bureaucracies to monitor Iraq’s religious leaders and, therefore, to control religious discourse. The resulting authoritarian system had a dramatic impact on the way that the regime instrumentalized Islam. As such, to understand the regime’s discourse on religion during the Faith Campaign, it is necessary to situate it within the context of authoritarian state-society relations. Previous chapters have laid out the regime’s system of control. It is now appropriate to discuss the regime’s attempts to spread Ba’thist interpretations of religion. This chapter will outline the content of Ba’thist ideas on religion in the 1990s and early 2000s. In doing so, it will demonstrate that the nuance and ambiguity of this content required strict regime oversight, and necessitated that the regime to employ it in very specific ways. Thus, as this chapter will make clear, the regime-sponsored propagation of Ba’thist ideas on religion were necessarily rooted in authoritarian structures.

Throughout the 1990s, the Iraqi regime propagated religious – especially Islamic – symbols as part of Saddam’s so-called Faith Campaign. Saddam built the “Mother of all Battles Mosque,” which had minarets shaped as Scud Missiles around its perimeter and then more four minarets shaped like the barrel of an AK-47 machine gun closer to the mosque’s dome. The outer minarets were 37 meters high and the four inner minarets stood at 28 meters. Together the numbers involved (4-28-37) denote Saddam’s birthday. Inside the mosque Saddam ensconced an
ornate Qur’an written in his own blood. The symbolism of these and similar projects was clear. Not only did they depict Saddam as a champion of Islam, they also aimed to create a personality cult in which religious belief was tied to support for him and his regime.

These more extravagant measures were paired with other less bombastic, but equally important religious programs. The Popular Islamic Conferences that Saddam had begun in the early 1980s continued throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. The regime also inaugurated radio stations dedicated to broadcasting Qur’anic recitation. Saddam also began to require some civil servants such as judges to take courses and even pass an exam on the Qur’an. In schoolbooks on Islam, girls are shown wearing hijabs. It is not surprising, then, that many western press reports as well as the academic literature on Iraq depict Iraq as becoming a quasi-Islamic state during this period.

As tempting as a narrative depicting Saddam’s turn toward Islamism might be, the regime’s internal documents tell a different story. In fact, these internal files are absolutely essential to understandings the regime’s ideology in this period. Saddam was not above misleading potential supporters about his views when it was in his interest to do so. For example, Saddam relied heavily on the leader of the Nation of Islam in the United States, Louis Farrakhan, to present the Iraqi regime’s views to Americans. Accordingly, the regime appointed Farrakhan

567 This differed from the schoolbooks from the 1970s that were published in a period when the regime had attempted to keep religion out of the public sphere. However, even secular Arab women sometimes wear the hijab in certain religious settings and Ba’thists had suggested that doing so was appropriate well before the Faith Campaign. For example, in November 1984, Saddam’s deputy headed a committed that suggested women wear a hijab when they attend religious schools. See “Untitled,” BRCC, 23-4-7 (0194), Feb 14, 1985. See, Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, 283.
568 See, for example, Michael Theodoulou, “Iraq Introduces Islamic Law,” The Times, June 6, 1994, BBC World Monitor.
as both the American representative to the Popular Islamic Conference Organization and a member of its board in Baghdad.\textsuperscript{569} Despite Saddam’s public support for Farrakhan, Saddam did not share his views. In fact, when one of Saddam’s advisors mentioned Farrakhan in a private discussion, Saddam replied “By God, I do not like them. I do not like those who engage in politics under the guise of religion. I don’t trust them.”\textsuperscript{570} In this case and many others, public appearances were misleading.

Fortunately with the regime’s internal documents help to clarify which positions Saddam took for tactical reasons in specific circumstances, and which views on religion represented more foundational stances upon which the regime based its actual policies. In March 1996, during the heart of the Faith Campaign, Saddam made a landmark thirty-three page speech to parliament. This speech is significant in that several months after it was delivered, Saddam ordered it to be distributed to the Party leadership in every province, and to the national offices. It was to be read aloud to every Party member and to be made the basis of the regime’s policies toward religion.\textsuperscript{571} Thus, it is a reliable indicator of the regime’s actual views, rather than its tactical posturing.

The ideas Saddam expressed in this speech as well as in his other religious rhetoric needs to be properly contextualized within broader debates between Arab nationalists and Islamists. As discussed in Chapter 1, proponents of these two ideological streams often clashed over the Arabness vs the universality of early Islam, as well as over the precedence one gives to Arab or Islamic unity. “Precedence” is the key word. The ideas were not mutually exclusive. A great illustration of the Arab nationalist position on these topics can be seen in the writings of Abd al-

Rahman al-Bazzaz, who was one of Iraq’s most prominent Arab nationalist intellectuals, activists, and politicians in mid-20th century. Like Saddam, al-Bazzaz admired the pre-Islamic past and depicted Arabs and Muslims as heirs to the great ancient civilizations of the Middle East. Yet, this did not negate his devotion to Islam. In 1952, he justified Arab nationalism by arguing, “We base ourselves on the wisdom of the [Qur’an] itself, on the true laws of the Prophet, and on the actions of the early caliphs who represent it best. It is these which represent true Islam, not the false and obscure concepts which have gradually become common in the Islamic world …”\(^{572}\) However, as a committed Arab nationalist, al-Bazzaz’s Islam was an Arab religion. He clarified that clear Qur’anic verses “confirm that Islam is the religion of the Arabs before being a universal religion.”\(^{573}\) And although he insists that Islam is important, he maintains that “to say this is not to imply a call for Pan-Islamism. To say that Islam does not contradict the Arab national spirit is one thing, and to make propaganda for Pan-Islamism is another.” Al-Bazzaz is not completely against Pan-Islamism in theory. He notes that “the call to unite Arabs … is the practical step which must precede the call for Pan-Islamism.” However, he then clarifies: “It is strange, however, to find that some of those who call themselves supporters of Pan-Islamism in the Arab countries are the most violent opponents of Pan-Arabism.”\(^ {574}\) As al-Bazzaz’s arguments highlight, debates between Arab nationalists and Islamists were not about the theoretical legitimacy of Pan-Islamic unity, but whether it had precedence over Pan-Arab unity. Most Arab nationalists also insisted that within a theoretical Pan-Islamic unity, non-Arab Muslim would need to recognize the preeminence of the Arabs and their leadership of the broader Islamic community. Other Arab nationalists in Iraq in the mid-20\(^{th}\) century had very


\(^{573}\) Al-Bazzaz, 177.

\(^{574}\) Al-Bazzaz, 184.
similar debates with Pan-Islamists and came to very similar conclusions as al-Bazzaz.\textsuperscript{575} Even Aflaq argued that while Islam was essentially Arab in character, he insisted that it was still applicable to all nations.\textsuperscript{576} In other words, Islam was an Arab religion for the Arab people, but if others wished to follow it, the Arab nationalists would not object.\textsuperscript{577}

If one is to understand Saddam’s arguments, they need to be contextualized within these ideological debates. In his landmark 1996 speech, Saddam made his position clear on these points. First, Islam was an unmistakably Arab religion. To make his point, Saddam discussed how some of the Prophet’s companions had used Ethiopia as a temporary base while they were waiting for the right conditions to move to Medina. Yet, they insisted on making their capital among the Arabs in Medina. Thus, Saddam argued, the priority was for Arab lands and the Arab people (\textit{ummah}). Ethiopia could not be used “in exchange” for Arab land. “Medina, not Ethiopia became the base for liberating Mecca.” He then gave several other examples of how the early caliphs’ identity was primarily Arab.

Then, on the debate over whether to give precedence to Arab or Muslim unity, Saddam is also quite clear. He attacked “two-faced” men of religion, who denied the need for Arab unity and replaced it with a call for Islamic unity.\textsuperscript{578} Saddam rejected this outright, stating “it is not permissible to be fooled by this ruse.” He then argued that those who gave precedence to Islamic unity in place of Arab unity were expressing a “tendentious call, even if it covers itself with

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\item \textsuperscript{575} See, for example, Sati’ al-Husri, “Muslim Unity and Arab Unity,” in Sylvia Haim, ed., \textit{Arab Nationalism: An Anthology} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 147-9. Originally published as, “Views and Addresses on Patriotism and Nationalism” in Cairo, 1944.
\item \textsuperscript{576} Michel Aflaq, “\textit{Dhikra al-Rasul al-\'Arabi},” 55-6.
\item \textsuperscript{577} Oddly, Amatzia Baram argues that in the 1990s, Saddam’s radically transformed Ba'hist ideology by adopting the idea of “Arab-led Islam with Iraq at the helm.” However, Arab nationalists and Ba’thists in particular had been making similar arguments for a half century. See, Baram, \textit{Saddam Husayn and Islam}, 260.
\item \textsuperscript{578} “Speech of The Leader President Saddam Hussein, May God Preserve Him, about the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, in the 11th meeting of the Parliament, given March 3rd, 1996,” \textit{BRCC}. 2982_0000 (620).
\end{itemize}
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religion.” He noted that the regime saw itself as ideologically closest to the “new generation” of “Nasserists in Egypt and Yemen whose call was based on the sincere foundation … of nationalism.”

In this and many other cases, the regime’s internal documents confirm that Saddam never adopted Islamism. Joseph Sassoon has gone as far as to argue that “the documents, in numerous instances, clearly indicate that […] the regime publicly launched a faith campaign but simultaneously, behind the scenes, continued to be anti-religious and to repress any sign of real religiosity.” If by “real religiosity” Sassoon intends traditional interpretations of Islam, or Islamism, then he is correct. Yet, this chapter will attempt to show that the situation in Iraq was more complex than a simple dichotomy between religious and anti-religious policies would suggest. Much of the confusion on both sides of this debate results from a Ba'hist discourse on religion which was intentionally ambiguous. This intentional ambiguity and the role it played will be detailed below. But first it is necessary to outline briefly why theories of either Islamization and or anti-religiousness do not sufficiently explain Ba'hist religious policies in Iraq during this period.

Sassoon is certainly correct in claiming that theories about Islamization of the regime are unfounded. Islam never overtook other political identities – most importantly, Arab nationalism. In many of the regime’s records where one would expect to find Islam, it is absent. Some of these cases have been mentioned in previous chapters, but religion is absent in other important areas as well. For example, one of the basic tools that the regime used to understand and control

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580 “Speech of The Leader President Saddam Hussein, May God Preserve Him, about the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, in the 11th meeting of the Parliament, given March 3rd, 1996,” BRCC. 2982_0000 (601). It should be noted that Arab nationalists such as Gamal abd al-Nasser had a deep respect for Islam. Abd al-Nasser included it in one of his three concentric circles of identity.
the population was school registers. The Ba‘thists used a number of categories to classify students in these registers: Political affiliation, party rank, reputation of student, ethnic nationality, etc. In the 1990s, these categories expanded considerably. They began to include the number of martyrs\textsuperscript{582} in the student’s family, whether members of the student’s family participated in the 1991 uprising, if the student was a member of one of the state militias, etc. However, religion was not among the classifications. It simply was not as important to the regime as ethnic and political identities.\textsuperscript{583} This is also apparent in the regime’s cultural indoctrination plans from the period. They emphasize Arabism and often fail even to mention Islam or religion.\textsuperscript{584} Furthermore, the regime maintained laws that clearly emphasized an Arab rather than an Islamic identity. For example, in 1997, Saddam signed a law\textsuperscript{585} that granted “Iraqi nationality” to anyone who had reached the age of majority, had two Arab parents, and continued to live in the Arab homeland (\textit{watan}). The law does not mention religion and no similar law referring to Islam existed.\textsuperscript{586} Moreover, as Sassoon has noted, senior regime officials spoke disparagingly of traditional forms of religion, were openly hostile to Islamism, and feared that fervent religious observation could lead to, or be a sign of Islamist opposition. For example, they closely monitored anyone who regularly attended mosque, especially if they came during non-prayers times.\textsuperscript{587}

Nevertheless, these details do not tell the complete story. Sassoon’s description of the regime’s ideological outlook focuses on its policies toward traditional interpretations of religion and of Islamism. However, regime officials were not against religion when it was interpreted to

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\item\textsuperscript{582} The concept of martyr will be discussed below. It referred to those who had died in the service of the regime.
\item\textsuperscript{583} For a chart that tracks the changes to these registers, see, Khoury, \textit{Iraq in Wartime}, 180.
\item\textsuperscript{584} See for example, “Cultural Plan,” \textit{BRCC}, 2982_0000 (0377-0379), January 9, 1997.
\item\textsuperscript{585} It was a slight modification of a previous law to the same effect.
\item\textsuperscript{586} “Decision of the Revolutionary Command Council. Number 12, for the year 1997,” \textit{BRCC}, 028-5-1 (0207-0208), July 7, 1997. The law was signed by Saddam Hussein.
\item\textsuperscript{587} Sassoon, \textit{Saddam Hussein’s Ba‘th Party}, 259-67.
\end{itemize}
their liking. This may not have been “real religiosity” in the minds of many believers, but neither
was it hostility to religion full stop. In fact, the regime continued to propagate Ba'hist
interpretations of religion both in public and in private. Thus, the regime was not completely
anti-religious, even behind closed doors. The dichotomy between public religiosity and private
antagonism toward religion is further undermined by the fact that the regime’s public rhetoric
and symbols were not entirely in line with traditional interpretations of Islam or Islamism. For
example, the Ba'his continued publically venerating pre-Islamic civilizations which would
have been an affront to many pious Muslims. In 2003, when the Americans invaded Iraq, they
faced elite Republican Guard Divisions named after pre-Islamic pagans such as Nebuchadnezzar
and Hammurabi. The regime also continued to sponsor cultural events that glorified pre-Islamic
culture, especially poetry, and as mentioned in Chapter 6, Saddam even linked his cult of
personality to a pre-Islamic pagan god. For Saddam, such deference toward pre-Islamic
civilizations did not negate his respect for Islam. In fact, as mentioned above, Arab nationalists
in Iraq, such as Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz had a long history of combining veneration for Islam
and pre-Islamic empires. Al-Bazzaz argued, “There is no contradiction at all between our sincere
Muslim feeling and our holding precious the ancient Arab civilizations of the Yemen, such as the
civilization of the Ma’inites, the Himyarites, and the Sabaeans, or the civilization of the
Amalekites and of the Nabateans, and the Arab civilization which preceded these, the
civilizations of the Assyrians and of the Babylonians.” Saddam appears to have shared these
sentiments. In contrast, it is difficult to imagine an Islamist or “Islamized” state would
prominently employ such pagan symbols.

588 Davis, 251-2. Davis argues that the only difference between these and similar works published in the 1980s, was
that the poetry was called “jahali” poetry instead of poetry “prior to Islam.”
589 Al-Bazzaz. 179.
As discussed in previous chapters, the regime was also keen to stamp out all forms of sectarianism among the population. This necessitated restricting traditional Sunni and Shi‘i views of their own superiority or of the failings of their rivals. Such policies often appeared anti-religious to those not indoctrinated into Ba‘thist thinking, but they were in accordance with Ba‘thist assumptions about true Islam as a non-sectarian religion that could unite all Arabs.

Accordingly, the regime neither became “Islamist” nor completely hid its views behind closed doors. Instead, on one hand the Ba‘thists attempted to formulate a nuanced interpretation of religion that supported Ba‘thist assumptions about the centrality of Arabism and the legitimacy of Saddam’s rule. On the other hand, however, the regime remained hostile to any form of religious independence and especially Islamism in Iraq.

Analyses of Iraqi policies that question whether the regime remained secular, or turned to Islam, also fail to identify the continuation of the Ba‘thists’ religious policies from previous decades. By focusing strictly on ideology, they neglect to consider the role that the regime’s authoritarian system played in the public manifestation of official ideologies. For example, Amatzia Baram, one of the most forceful proponents of the Islamization narrative, quotes Saddam’s boast in 2002 that “All the judges have learned the Prophet’s Tradition and the Blessed Qur’an…” For Baram this statement was a clear sign that the regime had transformed from “militant secularism” in the late 1970s, to “Islamism.”⁵⁹⁰ For Sassoon, such a quote would

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⁵⁹⁰ Baram, From Militant Secularism to Islamism, 13. It should be noted that in the face of several analyses of the regime’s internal records which challenge Baram’ thesis about an Islamist transformation, Baram modified some of his claims. Instead of arguing that Saddam adopted Islamism, Baram later claims that Saddam adhered to his own, unorthodox – what Baram refers to as “unusual” – version of Islam, which was more moderate and significantly different than that of the Islamists. However, in making these modifications, Baram creates several problems for his thesis that he does not address. While he changed some parts of his narrative, he leaves others in place. So, although he argues that Saddam did not adopt Islamist views in some parts of the book, in other sections, Baram continues to claim that Saddam was channeling the arguments of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, the “unusual” non-Islamist, non-orthodox Islam to which Baram states that Saddam adheres at the end of his presidency looks quite similar to the Islam to which Baram noticed Saddam adhering in secret documents at the beginning of his presidency – when he was supposedly in his most militantly secular, or even atheistic period. For the evolution of
undoubtedly be interpreted as deceitful and betraying the regime’s true policies of repressing religion. However, both these interpretations ignore the fact that clear precedents existed for such a statement. For example, in a 1979 speech to Iraqi judges, Saddam had stressed that it was important for them to study and understand Islam. He also emphasized his previously articulated stance that “we do not stand neutral between faith and atheism. We support faith as we always have and will always do.”

Accordingly, Saddam’s insistence that knowledge of Islam was important for judges was not new. The main difference between the 1990s/2000s and earlier periods, was that the regime began to require judges to take courses on Islam. However, this should be attributed to changes in the regime’s relationship to Iraq’s religious landscape rather than changing ideology. In 1979, the regime could not force judges to take courses on religion because it did not trust Iraqi religious leaders to teach such courses. By the 1990s, the regime had an abundance of trustworthy religious leaders under its control. Therefore, during the Faith Campaign, the Ba’thists were confident that the judges would learn interpretations of the religion that legitimized their rule.

A similar dynamic was at work in the regime’s promotion of courses on the Qur’an. During the Faith Campaign, the regime inaugurated a number of courses for Ba’th Party members and for Iraqi youth to study the Qur’an. Again, proponents and detractors of the theory of the regime’s Islamization disagree about the nature of these courses. The proponents of the Islamization narrative claim that these courses highlight an ideological shift for the regime. The

Baram’s arguments, compare: Baram, From Militant Secularism to Islamism, with Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, especially pp 318-22 of the latter in which he argues against the idea that the regime became Islamist. For an example of Baram continuing to argue that Saddam had adopted the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, see Saddam Husayn and Islam, pp 219-20, 255. For Baram’s apparent surprise at Saddam’s private, pro-Islam statements at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, see Saddam Husayn and Islam, pg. 133.

detractors claim that they provided a crude cover for the regime’s anti-religious policies.\textsuperscript{592} Again, both sides of the debate fail to recognize that changes in the regime’s authoritarian structures, rather than changes in its ideology, best explain its promotion of such courses. Since the late 1970s, the regime had stated its desire to spread Ba’thist interpretations of Islam as widely as possible and to emphasize “the importance it puts on religion, men of religion, and holy places.”\textsuperscript{593} However, in the 1970s and early 1980s, the regime struggled to find reputable religious leaders who would carry this message to the people. By contrast, the regime’s internal plans for courses on the Qur’an during the Faith Campaign of the 1990s highlight the role of trusted religious leaders who could teach the lessons in a manner that would enhance, rather than detract from the regime’s legitimacy. As the regime’s records demonstrate: “All the imams and sermon-givers who acted as lecturers in these course were screened by the division leaders in the Party.” These screenings were designed to ensure that “there could be no negative influenced during these courses.”\textsuperscript{594} After the Party divisions had screened trusted religious leaders in their areas, they forwarded their names to the Party Secretariat, which conducted another investigation. The Secretariat then sent lists to local Ba’thists of approved religious leaders who could act as lecturers in the courses. The regime also closely controlled which mosques could be used for the lessons and assigned specially designated Ba’thist officials to oversee them.\textsuperscript{595} The regime tasked these officials with ensuring that the courses adhered to “proper guidance” and that they would “guarantee intellectual integrity for the students.”\textsuperscript{596} In their reports to the regime leadership, the Ba’thists who monitored the courses give a decent sense of the regime’s

\textsuperscript{592} Again, see Sassoon, \textit{Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party}, 265-7; And, Baram, \textit{From Militant Secularism to Islamism}, 10-2.
\textsuperscript{594} “Activities that were taken by the Comrades Officials of the Tanzims about the Hostile Activities in Mosques.” \textit{BRCC}, 2696_0002 (0723-4), Undated, from the 1990s.
\textsuperscript{596} “Secessions for Learning the Holy Qur’an,” \textit{BRCC}, 2982_0000 (0575-0576), October 5, 1996.
priorities. The Ba‘thist officials reported whether the lecturers praised Saddam and Iraq, spread patriotism, and explained the challenges of facing colonialism and “American-Zionist imperialism.” These ideas were not new. They certainly would not have been controversial in earlier periods. However, only in the 1990s did the regime feel comfortable that religious leaders would adhere strictly to these ideas, and only in the 1990s did the regime have the institutional capabilities to monitor such courses on a large scale.

A similar dynamic can also be seen in other regime-sponsored courses on Islam. Some of these went beyond the simple lessons on the Qur’an, and also taught broader theories of Islam and politics. For example, in the late 1990s, Saddam began to require Ba‘thist Party members to take courses on Islam. However, only now with the opening of the Ba‘th Party archives have the curriculums of these course become available to outsiders. These curriculums reveal that the regime held true to its earlier teachings on Islam until the end. The regime’s internal documents state that the lessons on Islam were intended to “deepen the awareness for the Party apparatuses on the essence of Islam as it is understood by the Ba‘th.” The Ba‘th Party is described as a “nationalist (qawmiyya) movement” that stands in contrast to Islamist and Pan-Islamic movements. As in the past, the courses suggested that the Iraqi Ba‘thists wished to create “the new Arab man.” The regime’s records clearly state that the courses were designed to rely on the intellectual heritage of the Party, and to employ the writings of the “Founding Leader,” Michel Aflaq. Thus, it is not surprising that of the top five works listed in the curriculum for

598 As it had in the past, the regime refers to these Pan-Islamic movements as the forces of shu‘ubiyya.
599 The idea of creating a “new Arab man” or a “new Iraqi man” is one of the distinctions that Amatzia Baram attempts to make between the rhetoric of classical Ba‘thism and of Saddam’s Faith Campaign. Baram claims that this concept existed in the former but not in the latter. As this course indicates, that is simply not true.
Party members, four were by Aflaq, and dated from the mid-twentieth century. Numbers one, three, four and five on the list were Aflaq’s essays: “In Memory of the Arab Prophet” (1943), “Our View of Religion” (1956); and “The Issue of Religion in the Arab Ba’th” (1956), and “The Ba’th and Heritage,” which was a compilation of his ideas. The number two work on the list (and the only non-Aflaq piece in the top five) was Saddam’s 1977 speech, “A View on Religion and Heritage.” The plan also instructs Ba’thists to study the chapter titled, “The Religious Issue,” in the Central Report for Ba’th Party’s the Ninth Regional Conference held in 1982. It should be noted that those who claim the regime made an ideological U-turn often offer the 1982 report as an example of the militantly secular ideas that the regime had left behind. Amatzia Baram calls the report “The Last Stand of Fortress Secularism.” However, as this curriculum demonstrates, the ideas in that report continued to form the foundation of the regime’s view of Islam.

Clearly, the ideas being taught in these courses were not new. However, in earlier periods the regime simply did not have the institutional infrastructure to teach these ideas. It also lacked a broader system in place to monitoring and control religious discourse surrounding these ideas after they had been introduced into the public and political spheres. Only after constructing a religious deep state and establishing a system to monitor it, could the regime aggressively promote its ideas on Islam.

Authoritarianism as the Foundation for Religious Rhetoric

A close reading of foreign press reports from the period of the Faith Campaign demonstrates that the regime struggled to articulate its interpretation of Islam convincingly. The western press ran

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600 It should be noted that the regime claimed that Aflaq converted in the 1980s. However, the works that it included on the syllabus were from the 1940s and 1950s, when, even in the regime’s interpretation, Aflaq was still a Christian.


602 Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, 156.
articles supposedly revealing that the Iraqi regime was espousing an “apocalyptic Islamic vision” in an attempt to win over the Iraqi population. Yet, the Ba‘thists recoiled at such descriptions. They insisted that the regime’s policies were an “attempt to defuse the threat of Islamic militancy rather than encourage it.”

Such misperceptions about the regime’s views on religion were rooted in two phenomena. First, analysts of Ba‘thist Iraq have often conflated the regime’s foreign and domestic policies. Second, classical Ba‘thist rhetoric often contained traditional religious terminology that was employed in new and different ways. To mask the fact that Ba‘thist interpretations of Islam differed from traditional interpretations of the religion, Ba‘thist discourse often employed intentionally ambiguous language.

The nuances of the regime’s religious policies in Iraq were muddled by Saddam’s willingness to work with and even support foreign Islamists militants with whom he shared enemies. Thus, while Saddam provided no quarter to Iraqi Islamists, he often aided their foreign counterparts as part of a strategy to foment opposition in adversarial states. However, Saddam’s support for such groups – which included everyone from the most moderate Islamists to Osama bin Laden – was not dependent on shared ideology. Rather, the regime based its policies on a pragmatic assessment of whether these groups would support Saddam’s goals. It should be noted, that such policies were not limited to the regime’s dealings with Islamists; rather, they were part of a broader strategic approach that distinguished between domestic and foreign affairs. For example, the Iraqi Ba‘thists brutally repressed the Iraqi Communist Party, but they allied with sympathetic communist movements abroad.

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604 See, Helfont, “Saddam and the Islamists.”
605 For example see: “Untitled Report,” BRCC 2664_0001 (0330-0345), August 2, 1984,
Saddam outlined his strategy explicitly in his definitive 1996 speech.\textsuperscript{606} As discussed above, Saddam attacked Islamist and traditional religious leaders in the speech. He supported proponents of Arab nationalism such as the new generation of Nasserists. Despite these ideological inclinations, Saddam stated that he did not assess men of religion or Islamic activists solely by whether they were Ba’thists or they agreed with the regime’s ideology. The regime, he insisted, would work with those who have supported it. Indeed, he continued to ally with some Islamic activists outside Iraq, who did not view the Ba’thist regime kindly, but supported Saddam during Iraq’s wars. Saddam insisted “it is permissible to work with them, and it is not shameful.”\textsuperscript{607} Nevertheless, as the case of Louis Farrakhan mentioned above demonstrates, Saddam was often unequivocal about his distaste for some of his foreign partners. As such, one needs to reconsider analyses of Saddam’s ideology which conflate his domestic and foreign policies.\textsuperscript{608}

In addition to decoupling the regime’s foreign and domestic policies, any analysis of the Iraqi Ba’thists’ religious ideology during the Faith Campaign also needs to deal with the regime’s intentional ambiguity. This issue is, by design, much more difficult to untangle. For example, the concept of “faith” was obviously central to the Faith Campaign, but how exactly did the regime define the term? On a superficial level, one would imagine that promoting faith was very closely related to promoting religion, and in the Iraqi case, to promoting Islam. This has been a central assumption of many of the proponents of the Islamization narrative and indeed the fact that the regime built mosques and expanded religious education as part of the Faith

\textsuperscript{606} “Speech of The Leader President Saddam Hussein, May God Preserve Him, about the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, in the 11th meeting of the Parliament, given March 3rd, 1996,” BRCC. 2982_0000 (0595-0628).

\textsuperscript{607} “Speech of The Leader President Saddam Hussein, May God Preserve Him, about the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, in the 11th meeting of the Parliament, given March 3rd, 1996,” BRCC. 2982_0000 (616).

\textsuperscript{608} For examples, Paul Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq,” Foreign Affairs 85, No. 2 (March/April 2006); Paul Berman, “Ba’thism: An Obituary,” The New Republic, September 14, 2012; And, Amatzia Baram’s From Militant Secularism to Islamism.
Campaign would seem to confirm that notion. However, a closer analysis of the regime’s use of the term quickly calls that interpretation into question. For example, a course book for Ba'ath Party members juxtaposed “faith” and “atheism,” claiming that “the Ba’th is on the side of faith and against atheism.” This would suggest that faith had some religious significance. Yet, the same course book stated “religion is not a principle equal to faith.” So, faith was clearly distinguishable from religion and indeed superior to it. However, this still did not provide a definition of faith. When the book finally defined the concept, it stated: “Faith, which means having faith in the Party’s principles.” As such, the concept of faith had very little to do with traditional religious belief. Nevertheless, the regime would often quote statements by Saddam such as “the basis of our effort is faith and therefore, faith played a significant role within the Ba’th Party’s ideology and life.”609 What role did “faith” play in such a statement? How should it have been understood? It remains unclear. However, when the regime felt the need to present Ba’thism as religiously legitimate, this ambiguity allowed it to do so.

Another important term that the Ba’thist often left ambiguous was “umma.” The Arabic term umma simply refers to a group of people. It is often used to describe the global community of Muslims, but this has never been its only definition. Arab nationalists – and Ba’thists in particular – often spoke of an “Arab umma,” and thus employed the term as synonymous with nation. Iraqi rhetoric would regularly play on the term’s opacity as well as its religious undertones. Regime officials spoke about unity of the umma without specifying what exactly they meant. Or, even more ambiguously, they sometimes referred to the “Arab and Islamic umma,” which again left unclear whether the umma was a community of Arabs or of Muslims. Of course, some overlap exists between Arabs and Muslims, but they are not synonymous. Most Muslims are not Arab, and some Arabs are not Muslims. Nonetheless, the regime was able to use

these ambiguities to present standard, and long established Ba‘thist rhetoric as compatible with religious terminology and to conceal the gap between traditional interpretations of Islam and Ba‘thism.

Clear examples of this phenomenon were widespread in the regime’s public rhetoric. In particular, the religious textbooks used in Iraqi public schools during the 1990s were a testament to the regime’s manipulation of language. A fourth grade textbook stated “Islam is our heritage, we are Arabs. It is our creed, we are Muslims. Today we complain about the partition that rips apart our umma.”610 What was the definition of umma in this statement? Did it consist of Arabs or Muslims? It is unclear. In another typical example, a fifth grade textbook explained that because religion taught unity, it could help to restore “our raped land.”611 Of course, unity was also a central concept in Ba‘thism. In traditional manifestations of Ba‘thism, however, unity was always understood as unity of the Arab umma. The fifth grade textbook, however, was unclear. It called for the students to strive for the “unity that existed in Medina so that we can act with one hand, one voice, and one will, and work for the good of our religion and our umma…”612 This seemingly straightforward statement needs to be unpacked. On one hand, Medina was a holy city in the history of Islam. Yet, on the other hand, every Muslim who lived in Medina during the period of the Prophet was an Arab and the Ba‘thists normally claimed that story of Medina described Arab history. Thus, it is difficult to determine exactly how unity of the umma should be defined in the textbook. It could have easily described either a Muslim or an Arab unity.

Manipulations of language in the textbooks were not limited to the term umma, rather they were ubiquitous throughout the books. Another telling example dealt with theories of the

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611 It remains unclear to what extent fifth graders comprehended “rape” as a metaphor.
state in Islam. One year of the high school religious curriculum was devoted to this subject. The textbook for the course discussed classical theories of Islam. As such, it defined the caliph (and sometimes, in deference to Shi‘ism, the Imam) as “the head of the state in Islam.” In English, this seems fairly straightforward, but in Arabic it had different connotations. In Arabic, the word ra‘is is used both for “head” and for “president.” Thus, in another reading, the text defined the caliph as “the president of the state.” Such subtleties had clear implications for Saddam’s legitimacy as the president of Iraq. For example, the textbook used this careful manipulation to assert that “The Prophet established a state in Medina and he practiced certain matters that only the president (ra‘is) of a state can practice today.” These included, “declaring war, making peace, making treaties, leading the executive and judicial apparatuses.” In short, the president was completely responsible for all “internal matters and international politics.” Furthermore, it was incumbent upon Muslims to be obedient to the president.614 This play on words managed, fairly successfully, to insert the modern concept of a secular republican presidency into classical Islamic discourse. Of course, no such concept had existed in the mediaeval Islamic world.

Interestingly, this manipulation of language was carried out by Ba‘thist censors, rather than the author of the text. Everywhere that the term ra‘is appears in the book,615 one can detect an ever-so-slight box around the word – as if someone cut out the original word with a razor. Often the word ra‘is also appears in a different font, or is slightly unaligned with the rest of the sentence. Clearly the author had used a different term, but a censor had later inserted ra‘is in its place.

615 I found at least twelve cases. See, pp 55, 68, 70, 71, 74, 76, 77, 79, 81, and 82.
Other manipulations of the text are also evident. In each case, the censors’ intent was to depict Saddam as a legitimate ruler. In some cases the alterations went as far as to present Saddam in a semi-divine manner. For example, the author of the text provided verses from the Qur’an and below them, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. The censors then added quotes by Saddam, carefully inserting them under the Qur’anic verses and the Prophet’s sayings.\(^6\)

The Ba‘thists manipulated other traditionally religious terms and concepts outside of the schoolbooks. Often, they would empty these concepts of their classical meanings, and then employ them with a new Ba‘thist definition. For example, the term “martyr” typically refers to someone who died in the cause of Islam. However, as Dina Khoury has pointed out, “For the Ba‘th Party, a martyr was an individual – civilian or military – who had died in the service of the party and in the cause of the Arab nation as defined by the Ba‘th.”\(^7\) Similarly, apostasy usually refers to someone who has turned away from their religion. Yet, the Ba‘thists employed the term “apostate” to describe Iraqi prisoners of war in Iran who “had betrayed their sacred duty to their nation…”\(^8\)

A similar dynamic was evident in regime policies that some have interpreted as carrying religious undertones, but which the regime interpreted in a secular-nationalistic manner. For example, in the 1990s, much was made of Saddam’s decision to amputate the hands of thieves and deserters from the military. This policy seemed to resemble some interpretations of Islamic law. However, Saddam paired the amputation of hands with a policy of branding and cutting off ears – neither of which have a basis in Islamic law. As such, the motivations for such punishments were unclear. Some saw them as motivated by in Islamic law and others viewed

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\(^7\) Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime*, 165.

them in secular terms, as a means to fight crime and prevent desertion. The regime’s internal records suggest that Saddam had completely secular motivations for enforcing these new penalties. In a private discussion, Saddam discusses the reasons for implementing such policies. He states that the criminals who were subject to these new penalties lacked a strong sense of “nationality” (wataniyya). In fact, when Saddam initially explained the penalties, he did not mention – or even elude to – the Qur’an, God, Islam or any other religion. He presented his motivation for enforcing the new laws in completely secular terms. The only explanation that he gave was that the punishments were an effective means of preventing crime and desertion: “Cutting off his hand sometimes has a more psychological effect than death, in my opinion. The effect that accompanies the fugitive is stronger than expulsion or execution.” As such, he made clear that decidedly earthly motivations lay at the heart of such penalties. Later in the same conversation, the subject comes up again in the context of doctors offering cosmetic surgery to help people hide the wounds. In this instance Saddam states that the punishments are clearly articulated by the Prophet and the Qur’an. Saddam had left such justifications out of his initial statements on the matter, and it appears that they were not his primary motivation because although his new policies required the amputation of ears and hands as well as branding, when he later refers to the Qur’an and the Prophet, he only discusses the amputation of hands. In this later portion of the conversation he conveniently leaves out ears and branding as there is no Islamic justification. Thus, imposing Islamic law clearly was not the motivation for his decisions.

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619 Baram, Saddam Husayn and Islam, 288.
620 “Speech of Mr. President, The Leader, may God preserve him, during his chairing of the Minister’s Council Meeting.” CRRC, SH-SPPC-D-000-448, August 21, 1994.
621 “Speech of Mr. President, The Leader, may God preserve him, during his chairing of the Minister’s Council Meeting.” CRRC, SH-SPPC-D-000-448, August 21, 1994. It should be noted that Amatzia Baram portrays Saddam depicting Saddam discussing these new penalties as a divine injunction. To do so, Baram highlights that Saddam mentions the Prophet and the Qur’an. However, this claim takes Saddam’s words out of context. References to the
One could argue that despite his stated motivations, Saddam must have understood that the nature of the punishments meant that they could be misinterpreted as stemming from Islamic motivations. This is certainly plausible and it is therefore unlikely that Saddam would have permitted them if he had been reluctant to introduce Islam into the public sphere. Yet, by this point, his perception of control over the religious sphere in Iraq meant that he did not view public manifestations of Islam as a threat. Consequently, one could argue that the existence of a religious deep state in Iraq allowed for policies that were not religious in their motivation but could be misconstrued as such.

There were equally deceiving motivations for other policies which resembled traditional interpretations of Islamic law. The Ba’thists never banned alcohol, but when they restricted it in some areas, they gave social and economic explanations concerning conspicuous consumption in a period of severe austerity under the international sanctions. At the time, it was reported that the restrictions were enacted “to appease an impoverished middle class resentful of the speculators and professional criminals who alone have the money to drink … in Baghdad's nightclubs, restaurants and bars.” Moreover, the restrictions on alcohol were put in place at the same time as the regime banned 300 imports it deemed as luxuries. The regime wished “to concentrate on bringing in essential foods rather than luxuries for the rich.”

That these high profile instances were not motivated by Islamic law does not mean that the regime never referred to Islamic law. In the Ba’th Party files, which outline in detail how the Qur’an and Prophet were clearly an afterthought and, as mentioned, they could not be used to explain the policies in their entirety. Saddam’s motivations were not to impose traditional Islamic punishments, but rather to impose law and order. If some references to Islam were helpful, he would use them. See, Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, 266. It should also be mentioned that this is not the only case in which Baram reads Islam into regime policies during the Faith Campaign. At times he is explicit about doing so. For example, when Saddam refers to “our deep-rooted Arab traditions,” Baram adds Islam and thus renders the sentence “our deep-rooted Arab [read: Islamic] traditions.” And he renders Saddam’s statement “A Believing Arabism is the new road to faith and to rescuing nation” as “A Believing [Islamic] Arabism is the new road to faith and to rescuing [Islamic] nation.” See, Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam*, 263, 296.


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regime carried out and justified its policies, one is hard pressed to find any references to Islamic law – even in cases where it would have been convenient to do so. Contrary to the desires of their Islamist rivals, the Iraqi Ba’thists never made Islamic law a foundation for public policies. However, there were cases during the Faith Campaign in which the regime publically referred or eluded to Islamic law to legitimize its actions. Thus, Islamic law was sometimes part of the regime’s rhetoric, but not its practices. This was not a new tactic. As discussed in Chapter 1, when the Iraqi Ba’thists came to power in 1963, they repealed the Personal Status Law of 1959 because it was not in accordance with Islamic law.\textsuperscript{623} Then, when they seized power again in 1968, their new constitution referenced Islamic law.\textsuperscript{624} After a brief hiatus in the 1970s when the regime felt threatened by a religious landscape that was outside of its control, references to Islamic law continued under Saddam. Even early in his presidency, Saddam was not above referring to Islamic law to legitimize his most important policies. For example, when, the first Popular Islamic Conference was held in Baghdad in 1983, participants in the conference continuously presented it as representing Muslims from all sects (\textit{madhahib}; sing: \textit{madhhab}) from every part of the world. When Saddam addressed the conference, he argued that he would accept its decision on how to end the Iran-Iraq War even before he knew what that decision was. To justify this statement, he argued that consensus (\textit{ijma’}) among Muslims, which is one of the sources for Islamic law, superseded secular considerations and that this Islamic legal concept would be the basis for one of his regime’s most vital political decisions. In doing so, he suggested that Islamic law overrode secular law: “I may apologize to the Iraqi people, the scholars of international law, and those involved in politics and legislature, for they may criticize

\textsuperscript{623} Dawisha, \textit{Iraq: A Political History}, 185.
\textsuperscript{624} For copies of Iraqi constitutions, see the webpage “List of Iraqi Constitutions” on the website “Niqash: Briefings from inside and across Iraq” <http://www.niqash.org/articles/?id=2306>; Soeterik, 18-19.
Saddam Hussein\textsuperscript{625} and say how can a head of state agree in advance to something he has not yet read or seen or known. I would say to this criticism that when such a gathering of good men who have come from all parts of the globe, representing Muslims, are in consensus on an opinion, it must be the right one.\textsuperscript{626} The purpose of such a statement was clear to all the Islamic scholars in attendance – Saddam would adhere to Islamic law and he challenged the Iranians to do the same. Thus, the Iraqi regime’s references and allusions to Islamic law as a binding set of rules were not new in the Faith Campaign.

As mentioned above, these public references to Islamic law were almost never referenced in the regime’s internal documents. That fact did not eliminate the Islamic undertones of such policies, but it contradicts the notion that they could be attributed to purely “religious” motivations. The ultimate goal of the regimes contortions in its Islamic rhetoric was to conceal the gap between traditional interpretation of Islam and Ba’thist theories of Arab nationalism. To some extent, they were also meant to chip away at the barriers between religious faith and faith in the Ba’thist regime. However, this conflation of Islam and Ba’thism was not new. Michel Aflaq had argued against the “separation of nationalism (\textit{qawmiyya}) and religion.” He averred that, “Indeed the Arabs are distinct from other nations in that their national awakening is closely connected to a religious message.”\textsuperscript{627} The Ba’thists’ official slogan, from the early years of the Party was “An eternal message for a single Arab \textit{umma}.” In Arabic, this slogan carried strong Islamic undercurrents. The Ba’thists’ “eternal message” (\textit{risala khalida}) was clearly linked to the Prophet Muhammad’s revelation. In Arabic Muhammad is described as “the messenger” (\textit{al-rasul}) and his revelation is referred to as a “message” (\textit{risala}). As already mentioned the term

\textsuperscript{625}He refers to himself in the third person.
\textsuperscript{627}See, Aflaq, “\textit{Dhikra al-Rasul al-’Arabi},” 55, 58.
*umma* also carried religious connotations. Thus, Ba’thist rhetoric had appropriated religious content from the very beginning.

Saddam’s mixing of Arab nationalist and religious symbols during the Faith Campaign was a continuation of this tradition. As other Ba’thists had done before him, Saddam depicted Arab nationalism and Islam as essentially the same thing. During the 1990s, he discussed the “false theories” articulated by religious activists who argued that Arabs “must choose between Arabism and Islam.” Saddam disputed these “false theories,” insisting that “the Ba’th Party’s view” was that “Islam is a substitute for Arabism or vice versa.” 628 It is impossible to deny the resemblance of such a statement to Aflaq’s thought on the same issue in the mid-twentieth century. As Sylvia Haim pointed out in the 1960s, “For Aflaq, Islam is Arab nationalism...” 629 As such, when the regime’s propaganda discussed Islam and Islamic history, it was not always clear whether they were making nationalistic or religious arguments.

This ambiguity was also evident in during regime-sponsored celebrations of what many Muslims consider to be religious occasions. For example, on the Prophet’s birthday, the regime approved slogans that unmistakably reflected Ba’thist interpretations of Islam and Muhammad’s role in history. The slogans included: “The Prophet’s birthday is a new revival and the renewal of creating Arabism,” and “The Great Messenger is the symbol of the history of Arabs, their civilization, and their eternal message,” and they quoted Michel Aflaq’s famous statement, “Muhammad was every Arab and every Arab today is Muhammad.” 630 To attempt to parse out what exactly the Ba’thist meant in each instance, as some have attempted to do, misses the point. It is not possible to state that in one instance they intended secular Arabism and in another they

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628 This speech was included in an official training manual for Ba’thist cadres. “Study on Ba’th Party Principles and Iraqi and Islamic History,” *CRRC*, SH-BATH-D-000-474, Undated but from late 1990s.
629 Sylvia Haim, 64. (Emphasis is original).
intended Islamic religiosity, because from the very beginning the symbols and rhetoric of the regime were ambiguous by design.

The regime’s blending of Arabism and Islam was sometimes put into practice in ways that must have seemed strange and unusual for un-indoctrinated observers. For example, reducing Islam to a form of Arabism meant that all Arabs – even Arab Christians – were closely connected to Islam and Islamic history. As such, Arab Christians could at times speak officially as pseudo-Muslims on behalf of the regime. It has already been mentioned that the ideas of the Syrian Christian, Michel Aflaq, formed the basis of Ba‘thist courses on Islam and appeared in official slogans for celebrating the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Furthermore, in the late 1970s, Tariq ‘Aziz, a high-ranking Christian Ba‘thist, asserted, “The Ba‘th has always respected Islam and looked upon it as the spirit of the Arab nation.”

‘Aziz continued to make similar statements throughout Saddam’s presidency. In 1999, he represented the regime at Iraq’s Popular Islamic Conference. He began his lengthy address to the attendees: “Brothers: May God’s peace, mercy, and blessings be upon you. It is a pleasure for me to participate in this conference. I would like to address some of our Arab and Islamic concerns.” Such words coming from a Christian at an Islamic conference would seem absurd if one did not properly grasp Ba‘thist interpretations of the religion.

The content of Ba‘thist Islam had an effect on the manner in which the regime could instrumentalize it. Ba‘thist interpretations of Islam deviated significantly from traditional discourses on the religion. Accordingly, the regime required religious scholars to break dramatically with the past. Yet, the regime wished to present Ba‘thist rule as Islamically

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legitimate and in line with standard interpretations of the religion. Therefore, the Ba‘thists attempted to conceal the radical nature of their interpretations of Islam through the use of closely controlled ambiguities which blended traditional Islamic discourse with widely recognized Ba‘thist rhetoric on Arab nationalism. Such a strategy required certain concepts to be left undefined. If a religious leader delved too deeply into Islamic history, or attempted to define a term such as umma, the illusion of compatibility between Ba‘thism and traditional interpretations of Islam would be lost. Therefore, Ba‘thist discourse on religion rested on the foundation of very precise language. Consequently, the regime needed religious leaders who understood and were willing to remain within the tight parameters of acceptable Ba‘thist idiom. Thus, the rhetoric and symbols of the Faith Campaign were only possible after considerable efforts to shape an obedient religious landscape.

The regime’s instrumentalization of Islam also relied upon the institutional and bureaucratic capabilities it had built to monitor its message. Even with a cadre of committed religious leaders, the regime’s message was sometimes misconstrued. As an independent analyst wrote near the end of Saddam’s rule, “all literature of the Muslim Brotherhood was banned in Iraq.” This was true at Saddam University for Islamic Studies, “even for reference purposes.” However, some works by Muslim Brothers or their sympathizers sometimes slipped in through the cracks in the system.633 Sometimes this was due to the disconnection between the regime’s foreign and domestic policies toward Islamists. To the regime’s dismay, the non-Iraqi Islamists that it sometimes supported would at times attempt to exploit their good relationship with the regime to spread Islamist literature inside Iraq.634

634 For the regime’s discovery and reaction to such activities, see, “Information,” BRCC, 3342_0003 (0235), April 23, 1993; and “Information,” BRCC, 3342_0003 (0236), March 20, 1993.
Similar issues were present within the Iraqi Ba'th Party itself. Chapters 7 and 9 discussed the regime’s almost constant suppression of sectarian discourses and actions both in society as well as among the Ba’th Party and security services. The regime remained anti-sectarian, but these actions would not have been necessary if sectarian ideas had not been a problem among its rank and file. Some lower ranking Ba'thists and members of the security services appear to have misinterpreted the regime’s policies on Islam. They heard the regime promoting its Faith Campaign and they assumed that it was synonymous, or at least closely related to more traditional interpretations of the religion. This was a mistake for which some Iraqis suffered considerably. The regime had put in place institutions and a bureaucracy that caught and corrected Ba’thists who unknowing crossed ideological red lines with regard to religion. As mentioned above, the regime required Ba’thists to learn about Islamic history during their local meetings during the Faith Campaign. In one instance, censors who reviewed the content of these courses informed the Party Secretariat in Baghdad about a lesson that had “treated a subject far from the culture of the Party and the guidance received in the past…” and that “carried negative aspects for the present and future.”\textsuperscript{635} As such cases make clear, the regime’s instrumentalization of Islam was much more than rhetoric or symbols. To prevent its religious symbols and rhetoric from spiraling out of control, the regime’s instrumentalization of its particular version of Islam required an entire system to monitor and control the message.

Conclusion: 2003 and the Shattering of a System

Promoting religion in the public sphere is simultaneously useful and dangerous for an authoritarian regime. If the population takes such symbols seriously, it may begin to seek guidance from religious leaders. These religious leaders could easily lead people to believe ideas that are either extremely beneficial or quite detrimental to an authoritarian regime’s legitimacy. In the worst case, they could threaten the regime’s ability to rule. Saddam appears to have understood this dynamic. In the early years of his presidency, his Ba’thist regime had been reluctant to instrumentalize its views on religion too forcefully because it feared that by emphasizing the importance of religion, it would deliver Iraqis into the hands of religious leaders who were outside of its control. By the end of Saddam’s presidency, however, his regime was pumping Ba’thist interpretations of religion into the public sphere. Throughout the first decade of Saddam’s rule, his regime had put a system in place to mitigate the threat of religious scholars leading Iraqis astray. The system was based on two pillars – first, the regime created a large cadre of religious leaders who could be trusted to act in a manner that would legitimize Saddam’s regime; second, intricate layers of security insured that Iraqis remained within the regime’s designated parameters of acceptable religious discourse.

Importantly, the regime conceptualized Islam in a manner that downplayed sectarian discourses and promoted interpretations of religion that emphasized patriotic Arab and Iraqi nationalisms. These interpretations of Islam fostered unity and helped to bind society together, with the regime acting as the essential linchpin. The Ba’thists spent considerable time and resources enforcing this interpretation of Islam, and they had to fight constantly to ensure that religious discourse remained within what they considered to be acceptable limits. As this
dissertation has highlighted, Iraqis very often veered into unacceptable interpretations of Islam. In such cases, the regime needed both the knowledge that such ideological breaches were occurring and the means to address them. Consequently, maintaining control over religious discourse required extensive bureaucratic and institutional capabilities, which had taken the regime decades to construct. Only with this system in place were the Ba‘thists able to instrumentalize religion vigorously at the same time as they suppressed interpretations of Islam that would either undermine the authority of their regime or that would lead to large-scale sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shi‘is.

**Misconceptions and the American Invasion**

Like their academic counterparts, U.S. military planners and the George W. Bush administration failed to recognize the role that the regime had played in policing the boundaries of Islamic discourse in Iraq. American war planners likened the Ba‘thist regime to a “balloon” that only needed to be popped. An American Army colonel who was in charge of planning the ground invasion later lamented, “there was an expectation from the start that the Iraqi regime was a house of cards and all it would take was one stiff wind and it would fall.” These planners mirrored trends in academia – both before and after the invasion – that portrayed Iraq’s Ba‘thist regime as receding in power through the last decade of its rule. They argued that the Ba‘thists were isolated internationally, and weakened by sanctions. Thus, they were no longer able to exercise control over large segments of the population. As discussed in Chapter 8, scholarship on

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Iraq tended to focus on the opening of “autonomous social spaces,”638 and “counter-hegemonic” forces.639 In some instances it equated the final decade of Saddam’s rule in Iraq to the emergence of civil society in other authoritarian states.640 These portrayals likened it to a shell which surrounded but did not penetrate into Iraqi society. In such depictions, the shell could easily be removed, leaving social institutions intact. Scholars, such as Kanan Makiya, brought this conventional academic understanding of Iraq to the Bush administration.641 In fact, Makiya told the George W. Bush administration during the build-up to the war, American soldiers would be greeted with “sweets and flowers.”642 Another influential historian, Bernard Lewis, offered his analysis to Vice President Dick Cheney specifically and to the Bush administration in general during the build-up toward war. He described Iraq as the “already crumbling tyranny of Saddam Hussein.”643

As this dissertation has attempted to show, the regime’s internal records challenge this narrative. The first signs that something was amiss occurred during the initial weeks of the American-led invasion. In the words of two prominent historians of the war, the pre-war assumptions about the nature of the regime left the invading forces “utterly unprepared for the mission.” One U.S. military officer would later recall: “No assessment ever accounted for the threat we faced.”644 The invading forces often encountered fierce resistance from Saddam’s militias and security forces. Tellingly, they received no aid from the population, even in Shi’i regions with high levels of disdain for Saddam. Clearly, many Iraqis disliked the regime, and

638 Rohde, State-Society Relations in Ba’thist Iraq, 13
639 Davis, 227.
640 Rohde, State-Society Relations in Ba’thist Iraq, 13.
641 Makiya, Republic of Fear, xv.
644 Gordon and Trainor, 318.
some Shi‘is later recounted that if there had been “any sign of weakness by the government” there would have been an “uprising.” This may not have been a pro-American uprising in support of the invasion, but if Iraqis had indeed seen an opening, many of them would have attempted to throw off the regime’s yoke. Yet, in 2003 there was no sign of weakness, and there was no uprising. The Iraqi Shi‘is were simply too afraid. Patrick Cockburn reports that “security services were everywhere on the alert.” Even the opposition, such as the Sadrist trend, by their own account, did not challenge the regime in any meaningful way. On the ground, the regime was much more robust than outside observers had anticipated. The regime’s power, however, was not based on the institutions one expects to see in an authoritarian state. Instead of a powerful army and uniformed police, the Ba‘thist relied on civilian-clothed paramilitary militias and a deep state that was loyal to – or at least too afraid to speak out against – Saddam. Most analysts, both in academia and the U.S. government, seem to have underestimated these alternative sources of power.

The American military had to adjust its policies mid-battle to account for these mistaken assumptions about the ability of Saddam’s regime to control the population. To take just one example, the George W. Bush administration had removed numerous sensitive sites from its “hit list” prior to the invasion. The Bush administration believed the Iraqi regime did not exercise any meaningful control over them and, therefore, they would not pose any threat to U.S. forces. This again was a mistake and the Americans were forced to change their rules of engagement halfway through the operation.

Importantly, many of these “sensitive” sites were mosques and other religious establishments. Both academics and military planners believed the religious landscape had begun

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645 Cockburn, 115.
646 Gordon and Trainor, 366.
to function independently from the regime. When discussing mosques and other religious institutions during the 1990s and early 2000s, academic treatments of Iraq have argued that “inside their walls, people could feel free.” 647 Other academic accounts of the period portray an opening of religious discourse in Iraq and a new found freedom for Iraqi religious leaders. Some have even argued that the regime permitted (or even encouraged) the spread of Islamism. 648

Again, neither the events of 2003 nor the regime’s internal records support these theories. In fact, mosques were centers of regime-sponsored resistance during the 2003 invasion. In southern Iraqi towns such as Kifl, U.S. Army officers reported that the Shi‘i religious leaders based in the mosques were aiding the Ba‘thist regime’s fighters against the invading Americans. 649 Furthermore, the regime’s records demonstrate that this was no chance occurrence. During the buildup to the American invasion, Iraqi contingency plans stressed that in the event the regime was no longer able to maintain direct control, the Party apparatuses resisting the invaders should use the mosques and other religious places to spread their messages. 650 Ba‘thist operatives were also instructed to “recruit dependable sources and direct them to the mosques.” 651 Interestingly, this document also instructed Ba‘thists to assassinate religious leaders in the mosques. It is unclear which religious leaders they should kill, but since the regime’s plans were to rely on the support of religious establishments, one can assume that the regime planned to assassinate unreliable religious leaders while allying with those it trusted. 652 Despite such ambiguities, the Ba‘thists clearly felt that religious institutions were bastions of regime support,

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647 Zieidel, 163-5.
648 Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism.”
649 For several examples of this see Gordon and Trainor, 311-33.
rather than – as the historiography would have it – centers of independence and opposition. Perhaps most surprisingly, the regime’s control was not limited to Sunni institutions. The records demonstrate that the Ba‘thists were quite comfortable operating in Shi‘i areas as well. The example of Kifl was already mentioned. The Ba‘thists also felt they could rely on the support of the venerable Shi‘i seminaries (the hawza) in Najaf. Just prior to the invasion, the regime secured fatwas from the most senior Shi‘i scholars – the maraja‘ – in Najaf. The regime asked Ayatollah Sistani two questions: what is the obligation of Muslims toward the American attack? And, what is the judgement for those who assist in in the assault on Iraq? Sistani begins the first reply by citing two Qur’anic verses: “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress.” (Q 2:190), and “It is permitted for those who fight because they suffered injustice and surely God is able to assist them.” (Q 22:39). He then makes clear that an invasion would be an injustice worth fighting. In responding to the second question, Sistani rules that it is not permissible to aid a foreign country’s invasion of Iraq. Anyone who aides the invasion is guilty of “major sins and of violating taboos,” and that shame will follow in this life and the next. Sistani then quotes the Shi‘i Imam al-Sadiq. “There will be no mercy on the day of judgment if you hurt a Muslim.” Sistani reasons that if this applies for injuring one Muslim it would be even greater for attacking a Muslim people. He states that such a ruling also applies someone who “works with the foreigners to attack a Muslim country.” Sistani’s reasoning in these fatwas is not controversial from an Islamic standpoint, but in earlier periods, scholars from Sistani’s quietest school of Shi‘ism would have avoided making such overtly political statements. By 2002, he and his colleagues had no choice. The Ba‘thists were clearly in control. The other senior scholars in Najaf were even more emphatic in their support for the regime and their denunciation of an invasion. The specifically denounce America, asserting that its supporters “want to return to the
cruisades.” They claim that an American attack on Iraq would be an attack on “an Islamic land and Muslims,” and they “denounce this evil attack.” They issue fatwas stating that it is incumbent upon all Muslims to unite and to be together to succeed in the battle and they warn anyone who would help the American, that God will curse them in this life and the next. Some of the maraja claim that, defending Muslims against the infidels is “an Islamic legal obligation” for all Muslims whether Sunni, or Shi‘i.\footnote{Fatwas from the four highest ranking Shi ‘i scholars in Najaf can be found in BRCC, 009-2-5 (0001-0007), September, 2002.} Therefore, it is unsurprising that similar to their policies in other areas of Iraq, the Ba‘thists directed their fighters to report to the Najaf seminaries in the event that they lost communication with the regime.\footnote{“Contingency instructions for Iraqi government personnel in case of regime defeat,” CRRC, SH-PDWN-D-000-012, January 23, 2003.}

**The Destruction of Authoritarian Structures**

The nature of the relationship between religion and state in Saddam’s Iraq had significant repercussions for the country following the invasion. In 2003, the U.S. military operated under the assumptions of what it termed the “balloon theory.” In other words, the American invaders treated the regime as if it was a thin layer covering a largely independent Iraqi society. As mentioned above, their assumption was that this thin layer could be removed and that social institutions would remain largely intact. However, not everyone in the U.S. government shared this understanding of state-society relations in Iraq. Some dissenting analysts feared “the balloon might turn out to be a bowling ball.”\footnote{Gordon and Trainor, 77.} Such nonconformist views were not looked upon kindly by parts of the Bush administration and they were unceremoniously brushed aside. Yet, as this dissertation has attempted to show, the dissenting views were largely correct with respect to the
Ba’thist regime’s relationship to the Iraqi religious landscape. Iraq’s religious sphere was more bowling ball than balloon.

The regime’s had created a cadre of religious leaders who were loyal to the Ba’thist regime. These Islamic scholars did not simply disappear with the fall of the regime in 2003. They continued to have influence, and often – especially among the Sunnis – to propagate an Islam with clear Ba’thist undertones. Many of them placed Arab nationalism at the center of their Islamic message and viewed solidarity between Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs as an Islamic imperative. They emphasized “unity” and “resistance” even when it was unclear who they were resisting. They derided “sectarianism” and “division.” They insisted that Arab religious scholars – whether Sunni or Shi’i – felt nothing but distain for Iranians and they maintained that non-Arabs could not possibly influence “real Arabs.”

The fingerprints of Ba'thist Islam remained clear. Yet, while this inclination for non-sectarianism and unity among some religious scholars could potentially have been beneficial to an occupying power that was hoping to hold the country together, other impulses far outweighed the imperative of unity. Under the Ba’thists, these religious leaders had been indoctrinated to fight colonialism and “American-Zionist imperialism.” Indeed, the forces of American imperialism were considered the ultimate evil in the latter years of Saddam’s Iraq. In 2003, Iraqi religious leaders often felt that the American invasion was the manifestation of this great evil. Nevertheless, the trends that Saddam had introduced during the Faith Campaign continued. Iraqis continued to attend mosques, to study the Qur’an, and to seek guidance from religious leaders. Yet, while these leaders promoted

656 For a good example of this, see Asharq al-Awsat’s March 2012 interview with Harith al-Dari, the head of the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq: “Asharq Al-Awsat Interview: Sheikh Harith al-Dari,” Asharq al-Awsat, March 20, 2012. http://m.asharq-e.com/content/1332254378199676800/Published%20-%20Features
loyalty and quietism under Saddam, after his fall, these same religious leaders goaded their followers to resist American occupation by all means possible.

To make matters worse, the disintegration of the regime left the religious sphere rudderless and without clear direction. When the invading American forces became occupiers, one of their first acts was to dismantle the presidential office, the Ba’th Party, and the security services. Religion in Iraq had been handled directly by these institutions since 1979. They had penetrated deeply into the Iraqi religious landscape and formed layers of security, enabling the Ba’thists to monitor religious activity closely. As the regime promoted religion in the public sphere, the role of these institutions became essential to keeping Iraqi religious discourse in check. Without them, the system that the regime employed to stifle dangerous interpretations of religion would quickly crumble. The American invasion shattered this system.

The fact that religion had become ubiquitous in the Iraqi public sphere was not something the U.S. military could reverse. However, following 2003, no one policed what sort of guidance Iraqis received from their religious leaders. Thus, the American occupation unwittingly uncorked the potential for extremist and sectarian interpretations of Islam that had been bubbling – in some places burning – under the surface of the Iraqi religious landscape, but had been suppressed quite effectively by the regime until that point.

Among the Shi’is, scholars who had been living in exile – mostly in Iran – returned to southern Iraq following the invasion. Many of these scholars were in exile because the former regime had considered their interpretations of Islam unacceptable – either due to their Islamist sympathies or to the sectarian lens through which they viewed Iraqi politics. The leader of the Iranian backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Ayatollah Muhamad Baqr al-Hakim returned to Najaf shortly after the Ba’thists had lost control of it. The Badr Brigade,
militia consisting of Iraqi Shi‘is who lived in Iran and were commanded by Iranian officers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, followed him into Iraq. Many of these exiles had suffered long years in exile. When they left Iraq, their families were punished. The Ba‘thists had killed five of Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim’s brothers and a dozen members of his extended family. These Shi‘is often blamed not only the regime for such atrocities but also what they considered to be its base of support among Sunni Arabs. They were not interested in post conflict power-sharing or Muslim ecumenism.

Nevertheless, when these exiles returned they were often viewed with suspicion or were unwanted by the Shi‘i leaders who had remained in Iraq during Saddam’s rule. Power struggles ensued immediately. Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim was assassinated almost as soon as he arrived in his home town of Najaf.658 The conflict between rival Shi‘i groups was often framed in terms of who could best champion the Shi‘i community’s interests of Iraq. When combined with rising sectarianism and radicalism among the Sunnis, this framing of internal Shi‘i conflicts led some Shi‘is into increasingly sectarian and anti-Sunni political outlooks.

Among the Sunnis, the most important organization to emerge in the wake of the 2003 invasion was a groups which called itself the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq.659 The Association was formed just days after the fall of Baghdad. It was an attempt to unify Sunni religious scholars and to provide direction in the absence of the regime. Many of the scholars who formed the Association had been educated in Ba‘thist institutions and had been monitored closely to ensure their loyalty to Saddam. They were the remnants of the religious deep state.

659 The website of this organization is: http://www.iraq-amsi.com. Unfortunately, many of the early statements and documents of the association were found on its now defunct website: http://www.iraq-amsi.org. For more on its background and emergence, see: Rashid al-Khayyun, 100 ‘am min al-Islam al-Siyasi bi-l-‘Iraq, Vol. 2-al-Sunna, 177-207; and, Roel Meijer, “The Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq,” Middle East Report, 237 (Winter 2005).
Thus, it is not surprising that the Association often promoted ideas that would have been recognizable and mostly acceptable to the former Ba’thist regime. The Association framed the conflict against the invading American forces in nationalistic rather than religious terms. Initially, they preferred the term “resistance” over “jihad.” They were also ardently ant-sectarian. Even as sectarianism metastasized in post-2003 Iraq, the Association wished to “encourage unity and end the division between the sects…” 660 Despite this continuity with the past, in post-2003 Iraq, none of the checks that the former regime had employed to police groups such as this were in place. Ideas and people that the former regime would have censured were allowed to operate freely. For example, Harith al-Dhari, who emerged as the firebrand leader of the Association had fled Iraq in the 1990s. He maintained close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia. These facts would have prevented his ability to act openly in Iraq under Saddam. Following the 2003 invasion, no such restrictions were enforced.

This problem was exacerbated as waves of Iraqi as well as non-Iraqi fighters poured into the country to fight the invading American forces. Many of these fighters were violent jihadis who held extremist views about Islam and were openly sectarian. Some were sympathetic to groups such as al-Qaida. These fighters and their sympathizers in Iraq introduced their radical ideas into Iraq’s religious sphere, skewing its discourses. As Roel Meijer has argued, the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq had to compete with others who professed different beliefs about Islam. And as Meijer shows, “the Association was ultimately unable to withstand the lure of calling for a jihad and adopting a discourse that resembles that of the jihadi salafis in its praise of violence.” 661 Thus, an evolution in religious discourse occurred in Iraq following the invasion.

660 Meijer.
661 Meijer.
Interestingly, this evolution occurred even among some of those Iraqis who would become the most militant Sunnis. In 2014, a senior commander in, and one of the founding members of the organization known as the Islamic State gave a wide-ranging interview. The man, who went by the name Abu Ahmed, described the evolution in the Islamic State’s ideology since its founding after the fall of Saddam. Although by 2014 the Islamic State considered Shi‘is to be non-Muslim who must either “convert” or face death, such extreme sectarianism did not define earlier manifestations of the group’s ideology. Abu Ahmed argued that the conflict between Sunnis and Shi‘is in Iraq did not begin over theological disputes. “There was a reason for opening this war,” he claims, and “It was not because they are Shia…” Instead Abu Ahmed insists, the origins of sectarian conflict in post-2003 Iraq lay in the fact that “The American army was facilitating the takeover of Iraq and giving the country to them [the Shi‘is]. They were in cooperation with each other.” In other words, Abu Ahmed felt that the Shi‘is collaborated with imperialist invaders, and that the fight against the Shi‘is began as resistance to occupation. Nevertheless, since 2003, the views of Sunnis associated with the Islamic State and similar organizations have become increasingly uncompromising on a wide range of issues, including the legitimacy of Shi‘is and Shi‘ism. By 2014, adherents to the Islamic State’s ideology viewed Shi‘is as deserving of death simply because they adhered to Shi‘ism.

The evolution of religious discourse had occurred as militant Sunnis competed with each other and were radicalized in American-run military prisons. As Abu Ahmed states, “If there was no American prison in Iraq, there would be no IS [Islamic State] now.” Thus, the group’s militant views did not have its origins in Saddam’s Iraq, but rather in the aftermath of its downfall. In the absence of the Ba‘thists’ vast bureaucracy and Saddam’s ever watchful security

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663 Chulov.
apparatuses, there was no means of enforcing boundaries of acceptable interpretations of religion or preventing spiraling extremism.

The occupying powers did not understand the potential of uncontrolled religious discourse in Iraq because they failed to understand the relationship between religion and state prior to 2003. Similar to much of the scholarly literature on Iraq, they believed that the religious landscape in Iraq was self-policing. Thus, the regime could be removed without causing too much trauma. Such assumptions were mistaken. As this dissertation has argued, a proper understanding of religion and politics in Iraq requires more than an examination of public manifestations of ideology and religious discourse. One also needs to understand the relationship between religious landscape which produces such discourses and the ruling regime’s authoritarian structures. This critical issue was almost completely ignored. The results were tragic. When the regime was removed, it left Iraq’s religious landscape adrift with no means of curbing those who promoted increasingly radical interpretations of Islam. The result was a deadly cocktail of unhinged religious discourses and a population that had become accustomed to religion playing a significant role in their public lives.
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