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Ba'thi Iraq in search of identity: between ideology and praxis*

Although it has been in existence for 70 years, Iraq is still grappling with the very fundamental issue of crystallizing a national identity that would be acceptable to the various components of its population. Three interrelated factors have militated against the process. The first is the heterogeneity of Iraqi society, which has made it extremely difficult to find a common denominator for the different groups. The second is that one quarter of the population,¹ namely the Kurds, have a national identity of their own which they are reluctant to relinquish for the sake of a more general »Iraqi identity«. The third factor is that in its attempts to promote a broad-based national identity the Sunni-dominated ruling elite has been caught on the horns of a dilemma. It wishes to maintain the Arab-Sunni character of the state so as to keep its monopoly on power, but its very attempts to effect unity threaten to undermine this monopoly. The modern history of Iraq reflects these conflicting trends, and the ruling elite's attempts to reconcile them.

This paper will examine the Ba'thi regime's methods of tackling the issue of collective identity, and its approach to the more concrete political, socio-economic and ideological problems of government.

The Ba'th's advent to power in 1968 might have been expected to solve or at least reduce some of the problems regarding the state's political identity, as for the first time in its modern history Iraq was ruled by a party with an all-embracing ideology that was supposed to provide it with political, social and economic answers. Yet the Ba'th's »soul-searching« proved more intensive than that of its predecessors, as were the transformations that followed. However, these transformations only served to highlight the disparity between ideology and praxis. One explanation for this disparity was that the original doctrine was, in fact, deficient in many respects. Complaining about this deficiency in its ninth congress (in June 1982), the Ba'th stated bluntly that its original theory has lacked a clear action programme — »a lack which was one of the main causes

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¹ The latest assessments put the Kurds at 26.8 %, EIU, Iraq country profile 1987—1988, p. 8.

for the party's setback in Iraq in 1963«. ² It contended, however, that it was Saddam Husayn (Iraq's strongman in the '70s and President since July 1979) »who for the first time in the history of the party ... formulated with precision and in a creative and rejuvenating manner the Ba'thi theory of action in various fields«. ³ Another explanation for this divergency was the fact that, precisely because of its ideology, the Ba'th aroused antagonism among various groups such as the Shi'is, who loathed its secularism, and the Kurds, who were opposed to its pan-Arabism. Accordingly, even more than its predecessors, the Ba'th had to search for formulas that would enable it to reconcile its ideology with the requirements of government and the need to survive and acquire legitimacy.

The Ba'thi dilemma over the question of identity is reflected in its approach to the two competing »nationalisms« — Iraqi nationalism versus Arab nationalism, or *wataniyya Irâqiyya* versus *Qawmiyya Arabiyya*. Since Iraq's inception these two trends have been vying for ascendancy: while the first preached loyalty to the Iraqi state and sought to develop its particularism and »unity within«, the second preached loyalty to the Arab nation, placing emphasis on »unity without« and on the whole rather than on a single country. The rivalry between these two trends was described picturesquely in 1937 by one of the proponents of the »Iraqi« trend, who said: »We [Iraq] should not, as no other Arab country should, carry two watermelons in one hand. Every Arab country should confine itself for at least twenty years to the strengthening of itself and only then to care for others.« ⁴

In any case, the Ba'th's original ideology — first developed in Syria and then transferred to Iraq — has unequivocally opted for Arab nationalism or pan-Arabism, turning it, in fact, into the cornerstone of its credo. However, once in power the Ba'th began to falter on this commitment. Moreover, in the last few years there has been a clear tendency to shift emphasis from pan-Arabism to Iraqism. The Political Report of the Ba'th Party's Ninth Regional Congress announced that »for the first time in many centuries, Iraqi nationalism (*wataniyya Irâqiyya*) has become the primary bond for which the Iraqis are ready to die«. ⁵ For his part, President Husayn declared recently that »the Arabs are today 22 states, 22 situations, 22 rulers and leaders, 22 economic and social situations and 22 special national situations (*wad' waṭanî khâṣṣ*)«. ⁶ In granting such legitimacy to Iraqism, the Ba'th was responding mainly to the compulsions of the war with Iran, which began in September 1980. Perceived as the only possible common denominator between Sunnis, Shi'is, Christians and Yezidis, Arabs, Kurds and Turkomans, Iraqism was thus embraced as the main pivot around which to unite Iraqis and to rally their support for the war. On the other hand, lowering the profile of pan-Arabism was geared at conciliating Iraq's new allies in the Arab world, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, who in the early '70s had been deeply concerned about the Ba'th's pan-Arabism and the expansionist message inherent in it. As Iraq came to rely heavily on these countries for the conduct of her war, she felt it necessary to allay their fears by signalling to them that she no longer cherished »expansionist« ideas. Above all, Iraq had become disillusioned with the pan-Arab ideology and its effective-

2 Referring to the short first period of Ba'thi rule in 1963.

3 Al-Thawra, 26 January—2 February 1983.

4 Sâdiq Kammûna in Eliyahu Sason, *The Road to Peace* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1978, in Hebrew) p. 61.

5 Al-Thawra, 26 January 1983. See also Amatzia Baram, »Qawmiyya and Waṭaniyya in Ba'thi Iraq: the Search for a new Balance«, *MES*, 1 January 1983.

6 Al-Thawra, 5 May 1986.

ness as a tool for enhancing solidarity with her cause. The fact that of all other Arab countries it was Syria, a sister-Ba'th regime, that had become Iran's major supporter in the war against Iraq, was in itself illustrative of the ultimate bankruptcy of this ideology. Even more irritating to Baghdad was the fact that, while Syria continued supporting a non-Arab country against an Arab one, she at the same time clung to pan-Arab ideology and the idea of unity with Iraq. Syria presented this unity as a precondition for any *rapprochement* between the two; Iraq was unwilling to submit to Syria's unity plans, which she regarded as a ploy, and felt it had good reason to lower its pan-Arab profile.

However, the picture is more complicated than that. While fostering Iraqi identity, the Ba'thi information campaign has not discarded Arabism altogether. Indeed, there have been attempts to synthesize the two, often with forced formulas. Thus, in one of his speeches, President Husayn declared that »the new Iraqis are the new Arabs«, explaining that by the term Iraqis he meant not only those Iraqis who were part of the Arab nation, but also »Iraqi Kurds« and »Iraqi Turkomans«. »For«, he contended, »according to the modern concept of the nation as well as the concept of the [1968 Ba'thi] July Revolution, the Iraqi Kurd was part of the Arab nation.«⁷ He hastened to add however, that his words should not be interpreted to imply that he intended to deprive the Kurds of their own nationality. It is not hard to imagine that such utterances were likely to estrange the Kurds, but on the other hand they did fulfil vital goals. Insofar as the emphasis on Arab identity was directed toward the Shi'i part of the Iraqi population — who were torn between loyalty to Shi'ism and Arabism — then this emphasis was designed to reinforce their identification with the former at the expense of the latter. Second, sticking to Arabism served to emphasize the authenticity of the Iraqi Ba'th, which was always challenged by the Syrian branch, while also providing a physical and psychological »strategic link« with the Sunni-Arab world. Third, by raising the standard of Arabism, Iraq sought to present its war as one between the whole Arab nation and the »Persians« and therefore to present itself as the defender of the Arab cause at large. As is evident from this brief discussion, the Ba'th has employed the Iraqi and the Arab identity interchangeably — but this apparent inconsistency can be easily explained by the regime's need to address itself to various problems at the same time and to bring its ideology nearer to reality.

Socialism, which is the second important pillar of Ba'thi ideology, has also undergone a deep »transformation« within the two decades of Ba'thi rule. While in the early '70s the emphasis had been on the rapid implementation of socialism, by the end of the '70s (and following Husayn's advent to power), a serious attempt was made to challenge »dogmatic« socialism, to implement *infitâh* — the open door policy — by significantly strengthening the private sector and reducing the scope of activities of the public sector.⁸ The causes of this change were manifold: President Husayn's own inclinations and set of political priorities; general disenchantment with the socialist economy and the bottlenecks it had caused; the need to present a liberal image to Western countries with a view to encouraging them to do business with Baghdad; and last but not least to better cope with the economic problems generated by the war. Thus, the liberalization of the system was designed among other things to alleviate the burdens on the pub-

7 Al-Thawra, 5 May 1986.

8 See Robert Springborg: »Infitâh, Agrarian Transformation, and Elite Consolidation in Contemporary Iraq«, MEJ, Winter 1986, Vol. 40, No. 1.

lic sector and to reduce government expenditure. However, this new opening was highly controversial, arousing as it did the antagonism of both the more doctrinaire party members who feared the implications on other spheres of life, and those with vested interests in the socialist system. As this controversy has not been resolved yet, it is very likely that the Ba'th will continue to search for formulas to balance socialist and capitalist trends.

The Ba'thi dilemmas are manifest in its approach to three domestic issues: the Kurdish problem; religion and the state; and the role of the military in politics. Generally speaking the clash between the Kurdish national movement and the Ba'th was a strong one, and this for several reasons. In its demand for some sort of self-determination, the Kurdish movement posed a serious challenge not only to the Arab national movement — represented by the Ba'th — but also to the integrity of the Iraqi state itself. The Kurdish movement, for its part, viewed with great suspicion the ideology of the Ba'th, which had stated in its constitution that Kurdistan was part of the Arab homeland.⁹ Moreover, it feared that the Ba'th's commitment to Arab unity would result in the swallowing up of the Kurds in a united Arab state and their being reduced to an insignificant power. Hence the Kurdish threat to declare independence if unity with any other Arab state were effected. Another point to bear in mind is that during its brief period in power in 1963, the Ba'th went further than any of its predecessors in attempting to break the Kurdish movement by force. It seems, therefore, paradoxical that this same Ba'th would in its second term in power go to great lengths to accommodate the Kurdish national movement. The Ba'th was, in fact, the first Iraqi regime to have accorded *de jure* autonomy to the Kurds. The causes behind this revolutionary step, initiated barely two years after the Ba'th's advent to power, need not concern us here. What should be stressed, however, is that in the final analysis this *volte-face* remained theoretical only. Seen in retrospect, it would appear that the Ba'th had never intended to grant the Kurds a meaningful autonomy which might infringe on the sovereignty of the state and ultimately pave the way to secession. Also, the very notion of autonomy contrasted sharply with the authoritarian-centralized system of the Ba'th. Consequently, the regime is further removed today than ever from any solution to the Kurdish problem.¹⁰ The war with Iran, far from reinforcing the Iraqi Kurds' patriotic feelings, has provided them with yet another opportunity to attempt to achieve their own national aspirations. A Kurdish leader declared recently: »We want the partition of Iraq, as we see no other way of attaining our ultimate goal, which is independence.«¹¹

The Ba'th's approach to religion demonstrates that it is balancing on a tightrope. Since its advent to power it has insisted on a secular system and the separation of religion and state, a stance that was reinforced after the Islamic revolution in Iran. There are several reasons for this approach. First, the Ba'th is by definition a secular party; its acquiescence in the politicization of religion would call into question the very legitimacy of its rule. Second the Ba'th has come to realize that only by insisting on a secular system can it hope to bridge the gap between the various religious communities, and, what is more important, blur the Sunni-Arab minority's preponderance in the power-

⁹ John F. Devlin, *The Ba'th Party* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), p. 26.

¹⁰ The gap between declarations and deeds is demonstrated by the regime's apparent use of chemical weapons against Kurdish insurgents. *Jeune Afrique*, 1 July 1987.

¹¹ *Le Monde*, 16 April 1987.

system.¹² A more urgent consideration is the need to prevent Iraqi Shi'is from turning religion into a political vehicle against the regime, as was the case in Iran. In spite of this, the Ba'th has had no qualms about using religious motives and symbols for its political ends, sometimes even at the risk of a boomerang effect. In the last few years the Ba'th has gone to great lengths to appease Islamic sentiments, among other things by enforcing public observance of the fast of Ramadan. Similarly, on the declaratory level, the Ba'th has made a point of stressing that it is »with religion« (*ma' al-Din*), and that true Arabism, which the Ba'th embodies, in fact draws its inspiration from Islam.¹³ Carrying the argument further, Saddam Husayn stressed the amalgamation of Shi'ism with Arabism: »Al-Najaf is an Iraqi and Arab town. Its soil is Arab and its great symbol is our grandfather Imâm 'Ali Ibn Alî Tâlib, who is definitely not the grandfather of Khomeyni.«¹⁴ In his attempts to curry favour with the Shi'is, Husayn has gone so far as to claim a descentance from Imam 'Ali,¹⁵ a claim which does not necessarily enhance his standing among the Sunni part of the population. However, one should remember that such declarations are made under pressure and that they form part of the double-messages the regime employs to confront its dilemmas.

The Ba'th's dilemmas can also be discerned in its approach to the role of the army. From the regime's inception, the »civilian wing« of the Ba'th, headed by Saddam Husayn, had sought to break the vicious circle institutionalized since the first military coup in 1936, whereby the army kept interfering in politics and became one of the most important, if not the most important, power base. (The army was behind the changes of regime in 1936, 1941, 1958, 1963 and 1968). Husayn's wing sought to establish new relationships which would neutralize the army as an independent power and turn it into an obedient tool of the party. However, this trend clashed with the doctrine of power which was equally strong. Accordingly, it was the Ba'th that strengthened the army militarily beyond anything that existed under previous regimes and to the point where Iraq could dare, for the first time since its emergence, to launch a war against Iran. The war, however, has once more threatened to change the balance of power between the army and the party, as the latter has come to depend on the military for its very survival. In such a situation, another military coup cannot be excluded.

Notwithstanding the changes that occurred in Iraq's foreign policy during 70 years, there are underlying elements of continuity. One of these, a driving force for many regimes, was the ambition to build a strong Iraq that would be capable of playing a leadership role in the region and the Arab world at large. Sâmi Shawkat, one of the proponents of the doctrine of power, wrote as long as 1933: »Iraq's horizon of hope extends to all Arab countries ... what is there to prevent Iraq from dreaming to unite all the Arab countries?« He further said that »the spirit of Harûn al-Rashîd and the spirit of al-Ma'mûn want Iraq to have in a short while half a million soldiers and hundreds of planes. Is there in Iraq a coward who will not answer their call?«¹⁶ Shawkat's vision was fulfilled almost exactly under the Ba'th.¹⁷ Furthermore, in line with Shaw-

12 The Arab Sunnis are assessed at c. 25 %, Yehoshua Porath, »Nuri al Sa'id's Arab Unity Programme«, MES, Vol. 20, 4 October 1984; EIU, Iraq Country Profile 1987—1988, p. 8.

13 For an elaboration of this issue, see Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, »Islam and Arabism: The Iran Iraq War«, The Washington Quarterly, Autumn 1982.

14 Iraq, 15 March 1982.

15 Ofra Bengio, »Iraq«, in C. Legum, et al., eds., Middle East Contemporary Survey, Vol. VII, 1982—83 (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1985) p. 578.

16 Sâmi Shawkat, Hadhihi Ahdâfuna (Baghdad: matba'at al-tafîd al-ahliyya, 1939) pp. 1—3.

17 On the eve of the war in 1980, total army manpower was 450,000 and the number of aircraft was 500. IDF Journal, Vol. III, No. 2, Spring 1986.

kat, Husayn declared a few months before the war: »We can say now that Iraq's army is the army of knights and men of principles. Every one of them is ready to die in defence of his sword's honour. ... We hope that this will continue with even stronger determination so that we will grasp the historical opportunity [for playing] the [same] historical role which our forefathers had played in the service of the Arab Nation and humanity.«¹⁸

In attempting to fulfil the leadership role, though, Iraq was torn between two rival trends which might be called the »Fertile Crescent orientation« and the »Persian Gulf orientation«. Thus, throughout Iraq's modern history, there has been fluctuation between the two: when the first gained strength the other was weakened, and vice versa. Iraq's stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict and its conflict with Iran derive from this competing set of priorities. Yet it should be stressed that until 1980 the Arab-Israeli conflict and the question of Palestine had top priority on the Iraqi national agenda, as far as rhetoric, and ideological and military commitment were concerned. Moreover, the Ba'thi *ideological* commitment to Palestine was stronger than that of any of its predecessors. It is, therefore, another of the Ba'thi paradoxes that it should be the first Iraqi regime to have challenged Iran militarily, thus shifting Iraqi priorities away from the Arab-Israeli conflict and devoting its full attention, perhaps for many years to come, to the »Persian Gulf orientation«. One explanation, among many others, for this shift may be that only in 1980 did Iraq feel strong enough to unleash a war against Iran, whereas until that time she could only afford to participate in the wars against Israel which were not too risky to herself.

Falling in line with this shift is Iraq's »realignment« in the Arab world, which, once again, highlights the divergence between ideology and praxis. Theoretically, the Ba'th radical leftist ideology should have dictated a natural alliance with the Arab group of »radicals« headed by Syria (and including Libya, South Yemen and Algeria). However, this was not to be.¹⁹ For the most part, Iraqi-Syrian relations during the '70s were stormy; the collapse in 1979 of a major effort at *rapprochement* made them worse. With the outbreak of war with Iran, Syrian-Iraqi relations reached their nadir as Syria emerged as one of Iran's most important supporters. On one level, at least, one might surmise that Syria's breaking of one of the most important Arab taboos, namely that of assisting a non-Arab country in war against an Arab one, was her way of avenging Baghdad's »betrayal« of the Arab cause in Palestine, to which Damascus declared herself thoroughly committed. The other side of the coin is that since the beginning of the war, Baghdad has been linked in an informal alliance with such pro-Western countries as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait. Furthermore, Iraq's most important Arab supporter in the last few years has turned out to be Egypt, which has been supplying military hardware and know-how, political backing in various forums, and, most important, about 1.5 million Egyptian workers who, had, to all intents and purposes, saved the Iraqi economy from crumbling. This new-found amity was all the more impressive in view of the historical rivalry between the two, and the leading role Iraq had played in ostracizing Egypt at the 1978 Baghdad summit. One explanation for this development was that both countries had a common enemy in Syria; but more important was Baghdad's diversion of her energies toward the Gulf which reduced significantly the areas of friction between herself and Egypt.

¹⁸ Al-Thawra, 21 June 1980.

¹⁹ For previous examples of sharp cleavages within the »progressive« Arab camp during the '60s see, Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War* (3rd edition, London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

Indeed the wheel had come full circle in the 1987 Ammân summit, when another collective Arab decision provided Baghdad with both the pretext and justification for resuming full diplomatic relations with Cairo. By »sacrificing« another basic Ba'thi principle, Baghdad indicated very clearly where her priorities lay: the survival of the regime.

Baghdad's fluctuating attitude toward the two world camps is consistent with the various internal and external changes mentioned above. The high points in the swinging movement between East and West in recent years were: the Baghdad Pact of 1955 (and the concomitant break off of relations with the USSR); the break with the US in 1967; the treaty of friendship with the USSR in 1972; and the resumption of relations with the US in 1984. Only the latter two, which occurred under the Ba'th, should concern us. Regarding the treaty with the Soviet Union that was initiated by the Ba'th in the heyday of Iraqi-Soviet relations, it should be noted that while motivated by pragmatic considerations, it also fell in line with the socialist-revolutionary stance cultivated by the Ba'th at the time. Yet, barely three years later, this same Ba'th began to drift away from this alignment by initiating (through France) a major opening toward the West, a process which culminated in the restoration of relations with the US without any Iraqi preconditions. Coincidentally, perhaps, the restoration of ties took place after a seventeen year break, the same amount of time that separated the Baghdad Pact from the treaty of friendship with the Soviets. The causes of the move back to the US were: the need to check Khomeyni; the convergence of interests in the Gulf; the exigencies of the war; and the Iraqi realization that only by drawing the other superpower to her side could she increase the chances for ending the war. However, what is noteworthy about this move is that while it did fit in with Baghdad's new alignment in the Arab world, it none the less constituted a major breach of its ideological commitment, bearing in mind that the Ba'th had vowed not to restore relations with the US until the Americans altered their »pro-Israeli« stance. This is not to say, however, that the Ba'th is altogether free of ideological constraints; the fact that it took so long to decide on the restoration is one indication of this. In fact, even long after the restoration, Iraq kept the process of political *rapprochement* slow and hidden from the Iraqi public. Moreover, Washington remained a target for occasional Iraqi propaganda attacks, which were usually saved for the Soviet Union. Evidently, in this area, too, Baghdad was attempting to strike a balance between ideological posture and political pragmatism.

The Ba'th has taken radical steps in basic domestic and external issues which often clashed with its deep-rooted ideological commitments. However, these actions not only failed meaningfully to alleviate the country's problems and dilemmas, but also sometimes exacerbated them. The decision to go to war against Iran was a case in point. Once the war winds down, however, the Ba'th or whatever regime is in power will have to address itself to the problems mentioned above and to search for new solutions to them. By launching the war in 1980, Iraq shifted its priorities from the domestic to the foreign arena; it seems probable that the end of the war will force her to focus again on the home front. In that case, what will be the ideological determinants of the Iraqi political community: Iraqi nationalism, pan-Arabism, socialism, or secularism? What will Iraq do with such a big army and how will the regime prevent its interference in politics? What new methods might be found for solving the apparently intractable Kurdish problem? Will the army redirect its energies from the enemy without to the enemy within? The »Iranian option« has proved disastrous for Iraq. But will she be

able to disengage herself from this conflict and redirect her attention to the Fertile Crescent if so she desires? For some years now, Iraq has been steering herself in the mainstream of the Arab world. Will this trend be reinforced, or will the more radical posture gain the upper hand, as the recent attempts at reconciliation with Syria seem to suggest? The war has increased Iraq's dependence on certain Arab countries, but on the other hand it has also highlighted her unique role in rebuffing the Islamic Republic and defending the Arab world at large. Will the ambiguous situation convince Baghdad to relinquish a claim for a leadership role in the Arab world and the Gulf region, or rather drive her to demand it with greater insistence and vigor? The 15-year treaty of friendship with the USSR expired in April 1987. Will Baghdad attempt to disengage gradually from the alliance with the Soviet Union and adopt a more pro-Western stance, or will her dependence on military supplies from that country dictate a more cautious attitude for some years to come? The answers to these cardinal questions will depend, to a great extent, on the outcome of the war and the Ba'th's chances of surviving it. However, what seems quite sure is that the Iraqi search for identity will go on with even greater vigor.