

Shi'is and Politics in Ba'thi Iraq

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Although the regime has been reluctant to admit it, the Shi'i issue has of late become a major problem for the Ba'th in Iraq.¹ To compare this problem with the Kurdish problem, another intractable problem for the regime, would be instructive. Both Shi'is and Kurds have been on the margin of political power. Unrest in both communities has jeopardized stability in the country and has been a challenge to the Ba'th's authority. The two issues were rendered extremely complex by the involvement in them of an external actor – Iran. In both cases the regime has resorted to force as its ultimate weapon. In the Kurdish case, force was applied against them directly (April 1974 to March 1975) and Iran, under the Shah, was on the point of being drawn into the military conflict as well. In the other case, force was applied against the source of inspiration and incitement, namely, the Islamic Republic of Khomeyni. The two problems, however, differ in other respects. Being Arabs, the Shi'is find it less difficult to identify and integrate with the Iraqi state. Not so the Kurds who form a distinct non-Arab people. Unlike the Kurds, the Shi'is have not produced in the course of Iraq's modern history a strong political leadership of their own; nor have they a tradition of an organized military struggle or a political movement with well-defined and coherent aims. (The Shi'i tribal rebellions of 1935–37 were the result of manipulation from Baghdadi politicians rather than an expression of an independent Shi'i will.) The central government's physical access to the Shi'is is very much easier than its access to the Kurds, so consequently is its control over them. Indeed, the regime perceived a twofold threat from the Shi'is: one, a somewhat ill-defined religious challenge to the secular, modernist Ba'thi ideology; the other, a more tangible threat – a popular rebellion, masterminded by the Shi'i clergy and modelled on the Iranian upheaval. This paper attempts to gauge how serious the Shi'i threat really was and to assess its influence on Ba'thi politics.

THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

In his famous memorandum of 1932, King Faysal I analyzed the relationship between the Shi'is and the monarchy. He pointed out that due to the persecution of the Shi'is under Ottoman rule and their exclusion from power in that era, they continued to feel alienated from the Sunni government of the day. Faysal pointed out that the Shi'i clergy who had been deprived of the funds and *awqafs* which their Sunni counterparts enjoyed were inciting their followers to withdraw their support from the government. As an illustration of the Shi'is' feelings of deprivation, the King quoted a popular Shi'i saying: 'taxes and death are for the Shi'i while [government] posts are for the Sunni'.²

In 1968 when the Ba'th seized power in Iraq – the essential relationship between the Shi'is and the Ba'thi – Sunni-led government was not fundamentally different. The age-old discord between Shi'is and Sunnis subsided below

the surface but did not pass away altogether. The Shi'is, although a numerical majority³ had to all intents and purposes, the disadvantaged status of a minority. The Shi'i sense of deprivation and alienation from the government has not disappeared. For one thing, not only did the Ba'th not attend to the situation it inherited from its predecessors, but it adopted – at the outset – certain policies which further antagonized the Shi'is. These were: secularization; the persecution of the Shi'i Ulama and spiritual leaders; and the 'sunnization' of the upper echelons of the Ba'th party. The propensity to secularize the state received formal endorsement after two years of Ba'thi rule. The provisional constitution of July 1970 significantly modified the first one of September 1968. While the first constitution embodied many references to Islam, stating that Islam was its main source, the second diluted this in the more general statement: 'Islam is the religion of the state'.⁴ True, the Ba'th was not the first regime in Iraq to embark on this course, having as its predecessor in this Abd al-Karim Qasim (1958–63). There are, however, two major differences between the two. First, although Qasim was secular in his approach, he moved warily in the matter so as not to antagonize the clergy and large segments of the Iraqi population.⁵ In contrast, the Ba'th demonstrated – for many years – its insensitivity towards these popular sentiments. More importantly, under the Ba'th, an ideology – secular by definition – was involved; it aspired to replace religion as the main focus of belief and the rallying force for the Iraqi population. An unnamed Ba'thi official put it forthrightly when he said: 'In this country your own personal religion is up to you, but the religion of the [Ba'th] party is obligatory'.⁶

While secularism must have affected both Sunnis and Shi'is, it appears that its impact on the Shi'is was more disruptive. First, the basic concepts of Shi'i Islam repudiate the very idea of separating religion from the state or from politics. Generally speaking, the Shi'is are also more strict than the Sunnis and less receptive to modernist ideas such as those being disseminated by the Ba'th. Practically speaking, it appears that the brunt of secularization or the breaking of the power of religion was directed in the main against the Shi'is. Thus, in the summer of 1969, the Ba'th unleashed a campaign of repression against Shi'i men of religion and institutions which included: the closure of Islamic institutions including a theological college in Najaf; the imposition of strict censorship on religious publications; the authorization of the sale of alcohol in the Shi'i holy places reportedly for the first time in Iraqi history; and persecution of Shi'i Ulama in general. These measures provoked fierce Shi'i demonstrations which were organized by Shi'i men of religion and which the regime quelled by force.⁷ This crisis might have been triggered off by the Shatt al-Arab dispute with Iran which had erupted in April 1969.⁸ It seems, however, that its fundamental cause was the regime's determination to break the power of men of religion and the influence which religion had among the Shi'i rank and file as a precondition for spreading the secular Ba'thi ideology among them. But disseminating Ba'thi ideology among the Shi'is as a means of enlarging the regime's basis of support was one thing, and allowing them access to the higher echelons of the party and government was another. For one thing, from late 1963, the proportion of the Shi'is in the party, especially in its upper echelons, has been in the decline so that by the early 1970s, the

Ba'th was dominated by the Sunnis.⁹ Even if this phenomenon is to be attributed – as Batatu suggests – to the Tikriti localistic nature of this regime rather than to a sectarian bias, the result was the same: the Shi'is were excluded from real political power. One indicator of this trend is the composition of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) – the seat of legislative and executive power in Iraq since 1968. Thus, for almost ten years – July 1968 to September 1977 – not one single Shi'i was known to have been incorporated into this body.¹⁰ A number of Shi'is did participate in the various cabinets. However, since the Ba'thi regime has turned the cabinet into a body with no power over policy, the political influence of such Shi'i ministers has remained insignificant. True, exclusion from power was a general policy applied to Kurds and Communists as well. However, it appears that in the Shi'i case, this policy reflected the regime's low estimation of Shi'i power and not the other way round. This attitude was reflected by the Political Report of the Ba'th party's Eighth Regional Congress of January 1974. The Report discussed at great length the party's various problems and its future policies, including its relations with the Kurds and the Communist party, but failed even to mention the Shi'is.¹¹

THE SHI'I THREAT

Since 1977 a change – not readily discernible – has begun to take place in the regime's view of, and attitude towards, the Shi'is. Indeed, the regime began gradually to regard the Shi'is as a political force to be reckoned with and even as an element which might threaten Ba'thi rule. Three interrelated developments contributed to this change: sporadic riots in Shi'i areas, especially in the religious centres of Najaf and Karbala, as well as in the *al-Thawra* township of Baghdad; the emergence of Shi'i political underground groups for the first time in Iraqi modern history (the shadowy Fatimi group of 1964 was short-lived); and most important of all, the eruption of the Islamic revolution in neighbouring Iran.

The Shi'is' main mode of political expression has been through mass riots, especially during religious ceremonies. Such riots took place in February 1977 and were followed by more in later years. The disturbances of 1977 merit some discussion for they precipitated an internal conflict within the Ba'th regarding the place of religion in the state and forced the government to reassess its attitudes towards the Shi'is. In the first week of February, on the occasion of 'Ashura', disturbances on a scale hitherto unknown by the regime engulfed the Shi'i provinces of Najaf and Karbala. Tens of thousands of Shi'is, some of them well-armed, gathered around the holy places, denouncing the 'infidel' Ba'thi regime, and demanding its downfall. It was only through the intervention of the army that order was restored in the region. To this date little is known about the immediate cause of the flare-up or the forces behind it. It seems probable that the disturbances were encouraged by Shi'i Ulama. (It should be remembered that the two most influential Shi'i spiritual leaders – Ayatollah Khomeini, who was in exile in Najaf from 1964, and Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr – were strongly opposed to the Ba'thi secular regime.) On the other hand, it was reported that the Kurds who had been exiled

to the south after the collapse of their rebellion in March 1975 also participated in arming and inciting the Shi'is.¹² The Kurdish involvement can be inferred also from the fact that shortly after the disturbances the government issued a decree allowing the Kurds to return to the north.

The government itself blamed a Syrian agent for the riots. In their aftermath, it appointed a special court made up of three Ba'th Regional Command members – Izzat Mustafa, Fulayyih Hasan al-Jasim and Hasan Ali (al-Amiri) – to try the culprits. At least eight people were executed and more than 100 imprisoned. Nor did the incident die away without its internal repercussions. A month later two members of the Court, Izzat Mustafa (who was also a RCC member) and al-Jasim, were dismissed from their party and public posts. The Ba'th party organ – *al-Thawra* – justified the act by the need to maintain the party's 'revolutionary purity' and to uproot 'any sign of weakness and attempts to build bridges to the rear'.¹³ *Al-Hawadith* maintained that it was Saddam Husayn, the then Deputy Secretary General of the Regional Command and Vice-Chairman of the Regional Command Council who was behind the dismissals. It pointed out that the Shi'i riots had brought to the surface internal conflicts within the RCC, with Husayn blaming Izzat Mustafa (the head of the court) for being too lenient in his verdicts and for supporting a 'right-wing' of the RCC, which was trying to jeopardize the Revolution.¹⁴

The pressures brought to bear by the disturbances produced two distinct reactions. On the political level, the regime thought it prudent to open up for Shi'is wider access to power. The most significant indication of this was the fact that the third member of the court – Hasan Ali, a Shi'i – was not divested of his office like the other two. Indeed, from the time of the incident he was promoted and given more power. Another Shi'i – Muhyi Abd al-Husayn – was co-opted to the Regional Command of the Ba'th party instead of Fulayyih Hasan al-Jasim and in June of that year he was appointed secretary of the RCC. Moreover, in a reshuffle in September 1977, the RCC was enlarged to include for the first time a number of Shi'is including Hasan Ali and Muhyi Abd al-Husayn. More serious were the repercussions of the disturbances on the Ba'th party itself. Apparently, two conflicting groups had evolved: one advocated modifications to the party's secular line, while the other disagreed; however, the second one, headed by Saddam Husayn – the then 'strong man' – was to have the upper hand in future years. Inkings of this controversy appeared for the first time in a speech made by Saddam Husayn a few months after the disturbances and which was later circulated as a booklet entitled 'A View on Religion and Politics'. In this speech Husayn rejected categorically calls for the introduction of changes in party ideology so as to make it more able to cope with the Islamic trend, namely, to adopt a religious stance. Husayn maintained that the Ba'th doctrine had been, and should remain, a temporal one and that any change in this doctrine would precipitate an internal ideological crisis and political destruction. Husayn was as much against religious interference in political matters as against state interference in religious affairs. The total separation of the two was, in his opinion, the prerequisite for the maintenance of the Iraqi people's unity. At the same time Saddam Husayn made it clear that anyone who attempted to politicize religion would be handled with an iron fist.¹⁵

As mentioned above, until recently, the Shi'is had not formed a political party of their own worth mentioning. Whether this was due to their being a religious, and not an ethnic, group that found it easier to act within the existing legal or illegal parties – or to their long experience of oppression and organizational weakness – is an open question. In any case, the picture began to change slightly in the late 1970s with the emergence of some Shi'i underground groups. In this connection a few points need emphasizing: first, information on these groups is scanty and the little we know is more bewildering than not. One example of such confusing information is that a certain leader – Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim – was reported by different sources to be the head of four organizations or groupings at one and the same time. Another is that many activities against the regime were claimed by more than one group. The reasons for this ambiguity are manifold: to guard themselves against the authorities they thought it prudent to either disguise their activities or issue false information. On the other hand, young as it was, the movement tended to split into factions which often fought among themselves; needless to say, such factionalism did not add strength to the movement. Most of the information moreover emanated from sources hostile to Iraq, especially from Iran, who was believed to be behind most groups, but who was also interested in magnifying its activities and influence. It is also likely that the groups themselves tended to mix propaganda with fact. As a result, we cannot draw a clear picture of all these groupings, their leadership, the date of their establishment and the way they acted and were organized; neither can we assess their real influence among Iraqi Shi'is – which is a most crucial point. The most we can do at this juncture is to mention those groups which claimed existence or publicized their activities, leaving the future to reveal more details and perhaps prove their insignificance. The groups or organizations were:

- (1) *The organization for Islamic Action (Munazzamat al-'Amal al-Islami*, apparently headed by two brothers, Taqi and Hadi al-Mudarrisi);
- (2) *The Iraqi Mujahidin* (apparently headed by Mahdi al-Hakim, brother of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim);
- (3) *The Movement of the Mujahidin Ulama in Iraq (Harakat al-'Ulama' al-Mujahidin fi al-'Iraq*, established in 1980 in Tehran; Secretary-General Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim);
- (4) *The Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution of Iraq* (an umbrella organization established in November 1982 in Tehran; its spokesman was Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim);
- (5) *Al-Da'wa*.

It is indeed only the last grouping which succeeded in achieving significance, evidenced by the fact that the authorities, who tend to be so secretive, had to admit its existence. Regarding al-Da'wa, however, there have been reports of the existence of cells in this group since the late 1960s.¹⁶ The fact is that only after Khomeyni's advent to power did the group crystallize and gather momentum. Indeed the Islamic Republic of Iran served both as a source of inspiration and as an organizational centre for al-Da'wa. By saying this, it is not intended to cast doubt on the authenticity of the party or the Iraqi domestic causes that actuated it. While members are believed to be Shi'is, the

group itself never labelled itself Shi'i. Rather, its message was universal to all Muslims, its central aim being the overthrow of the Ba'th and the establishment of an Islamic Republic, more or less on the Iranian model. It is not the intention to discuss al-Da'wa's¹⁷ activities in detail, but a few points relevant to the present topic are significant. Shi'i men of religion have been playing a central role in inspiring and organizing al-Da'wa activity. Among those mentioned by the sources are Mahdi al-Khalisi, Muhammad Mahdi al-'Asifi (or al-Musaffi) and the sons of the late Shi'i spiritual leader Muhsin al-Hakim – Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim and Mahdi al-Hakim – who found asylum in Tehran from where they directed their anti-Ba'thi propaganda and activity. The composition and influence of al-Da'wa are not known but it seems that many of its adherents are young people, even teenagers from the provinces of Najaf and Karbala as well as from the *al-Thawra* township of Baghdad. The group has declared that in principle it is willing to co-operate with the opposition groups in Iraq – the Kurds and even the Communist party – for the overthrow of the regime.¹⁸ So far, however, nothing has materialized. The group's organizational weakness, physical separation from the Kurdish area – the stronghold of the opposition – and, most important of all, the ideological gulf between it and the Communist party have contributed to this. It is also possible that Khomeyni has discouraged such co-operation so as not to jeopardize the prospects of establishing an Islamic Republic in Iraq. Since the spring of 1980 – when its existence was acknowledged by the regime – the party has reported hundreds of anti-regime actions, including the assassination of officials and various sabotage acts. While it is difficult to verify all these actions, there is no doubt that whatever al-Da'wa did, it seriously alarmed the regime. The capital punishments law against al-Da'wa members and supporters enacted by the RCC at the end of March 1980 bears witness to this. The authorities fully implemented this law both before¹⁹ and after its enactment. A member of al-Da'wa claimed in October 1980 that in the past 15 months the regime had executed 5,000 members and supporters of al-Da'wa.²⁰ At the end of 1980 an RCC member Tariq Aziz (who had survived an assassination attempt by al-Da'wa on 1 April 1980), declared: 'Most [al-Da'wa] members were hanged or are in prison. Iraq is a well organized society'.²¹ Indeed, the regime had been ruthless in its efforts to break al-Da'wa and was quite successful. Nevertheless, the party continued to haunt the regime because of its appeal to the Shi'is and its unbroken ties with Iran which, in the eyes of the Ba'th, automatically made it a fifth column. That the regime's fears of al-Da'wa have not subsided is evident from the discussions during the Ba'th party's Ninth Congress held in June 1982 which concentrated on this party and attacked it ferociously.

The third and most important factor which brought the Shi'i-Islamic question into the spotlight was the establishment of the Islamic republic in Iran in February 1979. Indeed, fears that the Islamic revolution might overwhelm the Iraqi Shi'is as well had a direct influence on the regime's most important decisions and on state policies, including Husayn's takeover in July 1979, the establishment of the National Assembly (the Iraqi parliament) a year later, and the launching of a war against Iran. It seems that Husayn's takeover in Iraq only five months after Khomeyni had come to power in Iran was not

accidental. Husayn's move was preceded by a series of disturbances in the Shi'i area which started immediately after Khomeyni's takeover – probably under his inspiration – and continued well into June of that year. Attempts to curb the disturbances by the arrest of the Shi'i spiritual leader – Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr and his transfer to Baghdad – were of little avail. Moreover, the arrest itself provoked further disturbances in the Shi'i-populated *al-Thawra* township in the heart of the Iraqi capital. The mounting Shi'i agitation aroused controversy in the leadership and added one more element to the struggle for power between its members. Members of the RCC were split over the treatment of the Shi'is. While Saddam Husayn advocated a forceful policy, President Bakr and some other RCC members disagreed. On the other hand, Shi'i members in the RCC were reported to have demanded a greater share of power for the Shi'is.²² According to one source, on 10 June, that is, one month before Husayn's takeover, he presented to Bakr a list of candidates for execution which included Shi'i leaders who were held responsible for organizing Shi'i demonstrations as well as a number of senior officers blamed by Husayn for maintaining secret contacts with the rebel Shi'is. When Bakr objected to including the officers on the execution list, he was put under house arrest, and Husayn took effective power in his hand.²³ True or not, there is no doubt that the Shi'i controversy did play a part in the leadership crisis. It seems probable that developments in Iran and their impact on the Shi'is convinced Saddam Husayn against deferring his takeover, lest things went out of hand and he would lose the opportunity to become the ruler of Iraq – which he had aspired to and planned for for so long.²⁴ In addition, he probably considered himself the only person capable of handling the critical situation and of checking the Islamic Revolution. Neither was the Shi'i controversy settled with Husayn's assumption of power on 16 July 1979. There are indications that the discovery of an alleged plot some days later and the execution of 21 high-ranking officials was also connected with the issue, although not its only cause.²⁵

The Shi'i issue affected another decision significant to all Iraqis, namely, the setting up in June 1980 of the National Assembly (the Iraqi Parliament).²⁶ Apparently one of the most crucial considerations for this innovation was the need to provide a political outlet of some sort for the restive Shi'is and to create a modernist counterweight to Khomeyni's Islamic Republic. About 40 per cent of those elected to the Assembly were reported to be Shi'is.²⁷ Given the fact that the elections were tightly controlled, there is no doubt that this high proportion of Shi'is – which has no equivalent in other state organs – was a preconceived policy on the part of the regime. However, being powerless as it was,²⁸ the National Assembly did not provide the Shi'is greater access to power. Neither did it attenuate the threat of an Islamic revolution in Iraq. The radical step was taken on 22 September 1980 when Iraq launched the war against Iran.

In a nutshell, Iraq's motives for going to war were ambivalent: ideological vulnerability was offset by political and military strength. On the one hand, the secular Ba'thi regime felt challenged by the wave of Islamic revivalism which threatened to engulf the Iraqi Shi'is over whom the Ba'thi ideological hold was weak. Iraqi Foreign Minister Sa'dun Hammadi (a Shi'i) maintained

that the immediate cause for the war was Iran's efforts to export – by way of the Shi'is – the Islamic revolution into Iraq and to establish there a regime ruled by men of religion.²⁹ On the other hand, the Iraqi leadership felt confident of Iraq's political strength and military superiority. It envisaged that a blitzkrieg war would either topple Khomeyni or at least check his ambitions vis-à-vis Iraq, and would be a salutary warning to the Iraqi Shi'is, not to mention other strategic, political and economic gains. As early as July 1979 (that is, more than one year before the war) Saddam Husayn raised the idea of a campaign against Iran, linking this with the internal Shi'i problem. He told a Ba'thi gathering that Khuzistan could be Iraq's best line of defence against internal Shi'i uprising.³⁰ The fact is that at the time of writing four years after the beginning of the war, no Shi'i uprising has occurred. Whether the war accounts for this achievement and whether it will hold true for the future as well is too soon to judge.

WARDING OFF THE SHI'I-ISLAMIC CHALLENGE

The Ba'th had to cope with the Shi'i challenge both on the ideological and the practical levels. While the regime showed itself ready, for popular considerations, to accord greater deference to Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular it was reluctant to modify the party's secular platform in any way. When addressing the Shi'is, President Saddam Husayn strove to counter the ideal of the Islamic republic by raising other foci of identification: Arabism (but not Pan-Arabism of which the Shi'is are suspicious); Iraqi patriotism; and Ba'thism. While Shi'is had no difficulty in identifying with the first two elements, the third one posed a problem: the modernist, secular Ba'th is antithetic to the rule of Islam cherished by the Shi'is. In order to make Ba'thism more palatable to the Shi'is, Saddam Husayn argued time and again that Ba'thi ideology does not contradict Islam, since its principles 'were inspired by the values of heaven and the message of Islam'.³¹ Moreover, since his takeover he has been putting growing emphasis on Shi'i symbols and Shi'i heroes. On one occasion he went so far as to denounce the Sunni Caliph Mu'awiyya and to praise Imam Ali, emphasizing that the Iraqi leadership followed in the footsteps of Ali and Husayn: 'We have the right to say and we will not fabricate history that we are the grandsons of Imam Husayn'.³² The President also invoked Imam Husayn's martyrdom – a principal Shi'i tenet – as an example for Iraqi soldiers to follow in the war with Iran. At the same time, the government declared Imam Ali's birthday a holiday while Saddam Husayn and other Ba'thi officials made a point of visiting the Shi'i holy places in Najaf and Karbala and to attend religious ceremonies there. These manifestations of piety did not, as yet, herald an ideological shift in the party's secular line, not that there were no pressures from within the party for such a shift. The Political Report of the Ba'th party Ninth Regional Congress (held in June 1982) hinted at such pressures which it termed 'counter-revolution' 'deviation from party line' and the projections of 'old and outdated social and religious customs and concepts'. However, the secular line advocated by President Saddam Husayn triumphed, as it did in 1977.

Because of its importance and the revelations that it made, the specific

chapter of the *Report* which dealt with this issue merits some discussion. The Report implied that religious fundamentalism threatened to undermine the very foundations of the secular Ba'thi state. Making a distinction between 'faith' – which it considered a positive factor – and what it termed the 'religious-political phenomenon (*al-zahira al-diniyya al-siyasiyya*), the Report called the latter a deviationist and negative trend. Its leaders, the Report stated, were bent on achieving power and conducting present-day life 'according to anachronistic religious standards'. The Report disclosed that the 'religious-political phenomenon' had received a great impetus by the Iranian revolution of 1979; so had *al-Da'wa*. Various reasons were put forward for the fact that this trend had taken root among Iraqis despite the nature and the exertions of the Ba'th: (a) The religious-political movements exploited religious rites 'to cover up their destructive political activities', hence it was difficult for the state to trace them; (b) The Ba'th had committed 'errors' in the 'methods of organizing youth and students', and had driven some of these elements into the arms of *al-Da'wa* which, for its part, 'filled them with fanatic, religious and sectarian emotions ... and then forced them ... to carry out terrorist acts'; (c) The success of the Iranian revolution greatly encouraged *al-Da'wa* in its bid to create 'sectarian strife' and to overthrow the Ba'th; (d) Persian and 'Persianized' religious circles, filled with 'anti-Arab complexes' and closely linked with the Shah in the past and with Khomeyni now, used the cover of religion to act against the Ba'th.

However, the Report went on, the regime had succeeded in isolating *al-Da'wa*, mainly by refusing to let itself be dragged into sectarian strife. The expulsion of Persians was cited elsewhere in the Report as having contributed greatly to the easing of internal pressures as well as to the breaking of *al-Da'wa*. The Report further disclosed that 'the religious-political phenomenon' was not restricted to Shi'is, but that it also included Sunni activists. It therefore stressed the need to fight those elements wherever they existed and to whatever *madhhab* (school or denomination) they belonged. The Report directed the harshest attack against certain Ba'th members (unnamed) who, through their erroneous concepts and practice of religion, had helped to perpetuate 'the religious-political phenomenon' and had caused ideological confusion and internal division within the party. Thus, religious devotion (*tadayyun*) had begun to spread within some party circles to the extent that 'religious notions began to outweigh party notions', and the observances of Islam became, in certain cases, a yardstick for evaluating a Ba'th member or even promoting him. The Report pointed out that this was extremely dangerous, not only because piety was alien to Ba'thi ideology, but also because it might have divided the membership along sectarian (that is, Sunni-Shi'i) lines. The Report concluded with the following: (a) politicization of religion would not be allowed; (b) Ba'thi members who had followed an erroneous line should stick thereof to 'the party's principled and clear course'; (c) all Ba'thi members were called to adhere to Husayn's 'sound principled scheme and translate it into action'.³³

Containing the Shi'is required more than ideological persuasion. To do this, the regime developed a four-pronged policy designed to: (a) tighten the regime's grip on religious affairs; (b) break the power of the dissident Shi'i

men of religion as well as Shi'i opposition groups (for the latter see above); (c) preventing as far as possible the exposure of Shi'is to 'harmful' influences; and (d) to enhance their allegiance to the regime through various sympathetic acts which were, however, of marginal importance. A few months after his takeover, President Saddam Husayn changed the name of the Ministry of Awqaf to that of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, later linking this ministry – the only one – to the presidential office. This change, which is symptomatic of the regime's sensitivity towards the issue, was aimed at tightening its control on religious affairs. The Ministry's allocations were increased; its manpower and authority was enlarged. Thus, for example, the Ministry was empowered to supervise the curricula in all schools. Among the Ministry's most important innovations was the creation of a network of committees for religious indoctrination (*taw'iya diniyya*). These committees, which are manned either by Ba'thi officials or men of religion toeing the party line, are entrusted with the task of supervising sermons and religious rites which in the Shi'i case are liable to turn into anti-government demonstrations. Concerning Shi'i men of religion, the regime strove to break their independent power and their influence on the rank and file. At the same time it sought to encourage 'positive' activity by those who were willing to co-operate. Thus it succeeded in marshalling the support of Shi'i men of religion of secondary importance who played some part in pacifying the Shi'is. Their activities, which were duly publicized, included delivering pro-government sermons, sending cables of support to the president and the Ba'th, and visiting army units at the front. Most important of all, they denounced Khomeyni as a heretic³⁴ and declared the war to be a *jihad*. Presumably the government rewarded these persons with official positions and other material benefits.³⁵

For those who were reluctant to conform, the regime applied another policy. The case of the most important Shi'i spiritual leader – Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr – is significant. After various unsuccessful attempts to bring him into line, the authorities decided that there was no alternative but to execute him secretly (together with his sister Bint al-Huda) in April 1980. In resorting to such a drastic act – which no other previous regime had dared to commit – the authorities must have calculated that the resentment it might arouse among the Shi'is was far less threatening than his turning into the Khomeyni of Iraq. Another Shi'i Imam, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1977 for inciting a Shi'i uprising. After being granted amnesty he fled in 1980 to Iran, where he has been attempting since to organize an Islamic revolution in Iraq. In May 1983, six of his relatives, including his three brothers, were executed in Najaf as a warning. The present Iraqi Shi'i spiritual leader Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Kho'i, who has been reluctant to declare his support for the war, was forced by the authorities to reduce the size of his religious seminary in Najaf. Because many of his students have been arrested, his seminary now instructs only a few score students.³⁶ Shi'i opposition sources have claimed that since 1977 hundreds of men of religion have either been imprisoned or executed secretly by the authorities.³⁷ Another measure equally detrimental to the continued influence of Shi'i ulama, was the decision in March 1980 to control Shi'i corporate revenues.³⁸ This order enabled the regime to regulate the collection, allocation and distribution of

income and to supervise the general upkeep of all Shi'i shrines. Consequently, Shi'i ulama virtually lost their independence and became *de facto* government officials. In contrast to this harsh measure, in January 1980, the authorities issued an order exempting men of religion from military service. Evidently this decision was intended to placate them while simultaneously depriving them of the opportunity to exert influence in the army.

The government launched a policy of mass deportation of Iranian residents and Iraqis of Iranian origin whom they considered to be a major source of instability and disaffection among Shi'is. There are some signs that disaffected Iraqi Shi'is were similarly treated. The number of deportees has reportedly reached 100,000.³⁹ Concurrently, the authorities closed Iranian schools in Iraq, banned Iranian pilgrims from entering Iraq to visit holy places in Najaf and Karbala, and forbade – by decree – Iranians from acting as gatekeepers to the holy places. It also encouraged Iraqis to divorce their foreign (Iranian) wives and to marry Arab ones. Linked to this was the encouragement given to non-Iraqi Arabs to settle in Iraq so as to increase the proportion of Sunni Arabs among the total population. Another measure attempting to shield Iraqi Shi'is from 'Khomeynism' was the Iraqi authorities' decision to reduce drastically Iraqi participation in the pilgrimage to Mecca, which Khomeyni used as a prime opportunity to spread his creed. A decree of August 1983 allowed pilgrimage only to those Iraqis who had never before fulfilled this duty. In addition, government offices controlled the whole process from registration to medical check-ups right down to travel arrangements.⁴⁰ At home, the authorities banned Shi'i mourning ceremonies so as to forestall possible sedition.

Force has remained a principal instrument for containing the Shi'is. Until the war, the army took an active part in controlling the more agitated Shi'i areas, and is known to have intervened several times to quell Shi'i riots. Since the outbreak of the war security tasks have usually been delegated to the popular army (*al-Jaysh al-sha'bi*), the Ba'th party's militia. Branches of the popular army were spread all over the Shi'i south, even in the remotest areas. The popular army has engaged in various activities such as the indoctrination of local people with Ba'th precepts, maintaining order in the area as well as unearthing opposition networks. No wonder that the popular army's officials and headquarters have become a main target for al-Da'wa activity.

The regime coupled repression with generous measures, the most important of which were investment and other material benefits. Since 1977 and, to an even greater extent, since Husayn's takeover, following years of neglect, the authorities have begun to announce huge allocations for the development of Shi'i areas. Development projects included the construction of roads, schools, health and various social services and, most important of all, the restoration of mosques and religious sites. It is not known how many of these projects have actually been implemented, but the need to publicize them is significant in itself. A different kind of carrot was the government's attempt to win over al-Da'wa members by announcing an amnesty for anyone who left the party. For his own part, Saddam Husayn sought to enhance his popularity among the Shi'is. Apart from manifestations of piety discussed above, he visited a number of Shi'i areas where he distributed largesse such as television sets or

plots of land. In early 1982, to demonstrate that he had Shi'i support, he renamed the *al-Thawra* township of Baghdad, populated with restive Shi'is, the 'Saddam township'. However, when it comes to the question of offering the Shi'is a significant share in power, no dramatic changes have been made since 1977. It is true that more and more Shi'is were being advanced in the administration, the lower echelons of the party and the cabinet. But this policy had not affected as yet the more important posts. Thus, in the reshuffle that took place in June 1982 in the RCC (and other state and party organs as well), the proportion of the Shi'is has not increased: two out of nine members are believed to be Shi'is.⁴¹ Two observations are relevant: (a) the Shi'i RCC members are not the most influential ones; (b) the pillars of power continue to be controlled by the Sunni 'family': Saddam Husayn holds in his own hand the powers of President, Prime Minister, Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, Secretary-General of the Ba'th Party Regional Command and Chairman of the RCC; his cousin, Khayrallah Talfah, commands the army in his capacity as Defence Minister and Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces; while Husayn's half-brother, Barzan Husayn al-Tikriti, held, until autumn 1983, the key post of head of the secret services.

THE IMPACT OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION AND THE WAR: AN INTERIM ASSESSMENT

So far, Khomeyni's relentless and undisguised efforts to export the Islamic revolution to Iraq by way of the Shi'is have failed dismally. The Iraqi regime's tight grip and the Shi'is' weak organization and passivity, as well as, perhaps, their sense of loyalty to the Iraqi-Arab nation state are primary causes for Khomeyni's failure. On the other hand, if one of the Iraqi motives for launching the war was to use it as a device to ease the internal Shi'i pressure and to solve the basic conflict between religion and state, then in this respect it has not been too successful either. The Islamic-Shi'i controversy has continued to bedevil the regime. Moreover, the inconclusive war has created such tremendous problems in the political, military, economic and social spheres, that they eclipse any success the regime has had in taming the Shi'is. It can be further argued that the Shi'i issue has contributed to no small extent to Iraq's military difficulties in the war. For one thing, the regime has had to consider the harmful effects on the home front of high casualties among the Shi'i rank and file soldiers. Such considerations have often paralyzed Iraqi initiatives on the battlefield. For another, the war has placed the Shi'is, to a certain extent and in certain circumstances, in a dilemma: allegiance to their faith as symbolized by Khomeyni – now an implacable enemy – or loyalty to the nation-state, embodied in the unsympathetic, secular Ba'thi regime. This dilemma was reflected in their conduct during the war (when this was raging on Iranian territory, that is, until July 1982). While there have been no serious civilian upheavals as far as we know, the situation in the army has been more problematic. Iraqi soldiers – most of whom are Shi'is – have lacked steadfastness, high morale and motivation, certainly when compared with their Iranian counterparts. Moreover, desertion to the Iranian side, especially of Shi'i soldiers,⁴² has been quite widespread and damaging. At

one time Iran organized these deserters into what was termed 'the army of revenge'. This force of 10,000 combatants has reportedly participated in the fighting against the Iraqi army.⁴³

To balance the picture, it should be stressed that the problem was not so acute as to decide the outcome of the war against Iraq. It should be equally stressed that even Shi'i activists did not attempt to challenge the country's integrity, but rather the political order in it. For although the Ba'thi regime has been in power for more than 15 years, and in spite of the fact that it has gone to great lengths to pacify the Shi'is in the last years, it still apparently lacks legitimacy in the eyes of many of them. On the other hand, although the Shi'is have become more politicized in recent years, thereby constituting a major destabilizing force for the regime, they do not appear to be strong enough to organize and bring about *by themselves* an 'Islamic revolution' in Iraq. Neither is there any certainty that this is something aspired to by the bulk of them. It is indeed very likely that the Shi'i threat has been magnified beyond all proportion by the regime itself, a regime which has remained as paranoid and as vigilant as ever.

NOTES

1. The extent to which the regime has suppressed the issue can be gathered from the fact that the term Shi'i itself has become almost taboo in the Iraqi media. This in itself poses tremendous difficulties for the analyst.
2. The Memorandum was quoted in Abd al-Razzaq al-Hasani, *Ta'rikh al-wizarat al-Iraqiyya* (Annals of Iraqi Cabinets) (Sidon, 1939), pp.189-95. The above quotation is on p.191.
3. According to estimates based on the 1947 census, the Shi'is represented 54.1 per cent of the total population. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements in Iraq* (Princeton, NJ, 1978), p.40. The Ba'thi regime made a census in October 1977 but never published the results relating to sects or the ethnic distribution of the population.
4. For a comparison between the two constitutions, see Uriel Dann, *The Regime of Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr from a Constitutional Angle* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, April 1971).
5. Uriel Dann, *Iraq under Qassem* (Jerusalem, 1969), pp.65-6; 328.
6. *Washington Post* (Washington), 11 April 1979.
7. For the crisis, see Dina Kehat, 'Iraq', in Daniel Dishon (ed.), *The Middle East Record, 1969-1970* (Jerusalem, 1977) p.728; Abraham Haim, 'The Shi'is in Iraq', *Hamizarah Hehadash* (Jerusalem), Vol. 19 (1969), pp.346-51.
8. *The Middle East Record 1969-1970*, pp.652-4; 728.
9. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, pp.1078-9. Other analysts claim that Shi'i Ba'this do not find obstacles to advancement. This affirmation, however, is not substantiated by facts. For a discussion see P. and M. Sluglett, 'Some Reflections on the Sunni-Shi'i question in Iraq', *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Bulletin*, Vol. 5 (1978), p.85.
10. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, pp.1086-8.
11. See *The Political Report adopted by the 8th Regional Congress of the ARAB Ba'th Socialist Party-Iraq* (October 1974).
12. *The Middle East* (London), July 1977.
13. *Al-Thawra* (Baghdad), as quoted by the Iraqi News Agency (INA), 25 March – Daily Report (DR), 25 March 1977.
14. *Al-Hawadith* (London), 1 April 1977.
15. Saddam Husayn, *Hawla kitabat al-ta'rikh* (on the writing of history) (Baghdad, 1979). Husayn's speech entitled 'A View on Religion and Politics' is on pp.28-40.
16. Hanna Batatu, 'Iraq's Underground Shi'a Movements: Characteristics, Causes and Prospects', *MEJ* (Autumn 1981), p.578. Al-Da'wa itself mentions the year 1957 as the date of its establishment. (*Al-Nashra* (Cyprus), 5 December 1983.) If this is true, then it has been a shadowy existence.

17. For a detailed discussion, see Batatu, *ibid.*, pp.578-94.
18. *Bayan al-Tafahum al-Sadir Min Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya ila al-Umma Fi al-'Iraq* (Manifesto for Mutual Understanding issued by al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya party to the nation in Iraq) (*Manshurat Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya al-I'lam al-Markazi* No. 8), pp.14-19.
19. Scores of al-Da'wa members were executed without trial before the enactment of the law, *Le Monde* (Paris), 19 April 1980. It should be noted that the law itself decreed that the death penalty would be applied 'retroactively'.
20. Voice of Iraqi Kurdistan, 7 October – British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 9 October 1980.
21. *The Washington Star* (Washington), 23 December 1980.
22. *Foreign Report*, 1 August; *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), 3 August; *New York Times*, 8 August 1979.
23. *Foreign Report* (London), 1 August 1979.
24. What is argued here, then, is that the timing and not the takeover as such was influenced by the Shi'i question.
25. The alleged mastermind of the plot – RCC member Muhyi Abd al-Husayn al-Mashhadi (a shi'i) – protested earlier in June against the 'intolerable' treatment meted out to the shi'is, *New York Times*, 8 August 1979.
26. The Iraqi Parliament was dissolved after the revolution of July 1958.
27. Amatzia Baram, 'The June 1980 Elections to the National Assembly in Iraq: An Experiment in Controlled Democracy', *Orient* (Hamburg) (September 1981), p.401.
28. The National Assembly law was formulated in such a way as to neutralize its powers altogether. See Colin Legum, Haim Shaked and Daniel Dishon (eds.), *Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS)*. Vol.IV (New York, 1981) pp.506-7.
29. *Al-Thawra*, 15 May 1982. The fact that Hammadi chose to stress this cause, of all others, is significant for portraying the war as a defensive and not an offensive one.
30. *Foreign Report*, 1 August 1979.
31. For example, INA, 17 October – BBC, 19 October 1979.
32. INA, 8 August – DR, 9 August 1979.
33. Radio Baghdad, 27 June – DR, 1 July 1982, *al-Thawra*, 1 February 1983.
34. It would be noted that the Fatwa which declared Khomeyni a heretic and was published by *al-Thawra* did not carry the signature of an 'alim. See *al-Thawra*, 2 May 1981.
35. For example, Saddam Husayn ordered the building of houses for the gatekeeper and officials of a certain mosque in the Shi'i district of Maysan (*al-Thawra*, 28 June 1982).
36. *The Guardian* (London), 22 April 1982, *Amnesty International Report 1983*, p.309.
37. *Bayan al-Tafahum*, pp.7-9; *Middle East International*, 3 August 1979.
38. *Al-Thawra*, 7 March 1980.
39. *International Herald Tribune*, 3 December 1982.
40. *Qadisiyyat Saddam*, 6 August 1983; *al-Thawra*, 29 June 1982.
41. The one is Hasan Ali (al-Amiri). However, it is uncertain whether Sa'dun Shakir is Shi'i or not. It should be remembered that Iraqi sources never reveal the ethnic or communal origin of Iraqi officials, so that one has to rely for this either on non-Iraqi sources or on indirect evidence such as birthplace or family name.
42. *The Financial Times* (London), 22 July 1982.
43. *The Financial Times*, 22 July; *Middle East International* (London), 30 July 1982.