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From Pan-Arab Nationalism to Islamism: The Rise and Fall of Saddam Hussein

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ABSTRACT

Arab nationalism was the core of the Ba'ath party's ideology when it was formed in Iraq in 1968. The party subscribed to a secular nationalist ideology that aimed to unify the Arab nations across the Middle East. When Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq in 1979, he embraced and supported the Ba'athist nationalist, socialist, and secular ideology. However, from the early days of his presidency, Hussein used religion to justify his external war of aggression against Iran, and gradually, religion became an instrument of political and military mobilization. In other words, while formally subscribing primarily to pan-Arab secular nationalism, the regime also used religion to justify its rule, boost the legitimacy of the Ba'ath party and to foster Saddam Hussein's support base. This paper aim to examine the origins of the religious re-orientation of the Ba'ath party, as well as the factors that influenced the Ba'ath regime and its stability in Iraq. This paper finds that even though Saddam Hussein was notorious in his use of both nationalist and religious rhetoric, he progressively shifted to relying primarily on religion to maintain power, particularly after being defeated in the first Gulf War in 1991.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my amazing son, Joseph, family, and friends who have supported and motivated me through my academic journey. I could not have done this without you.

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INTRODUCTION

Arab nationalism was the core of the Ba'ath party's ideology when it was formed in Iraq in 1968 (Franzen, 2011). The party subscribed to a secular nationalist ideology that aimed to unify the Arab nations across the Middle East. When Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq in 1979, he embraced and supported the Ba'athist nationalist, socialist, and secular ideology (Franzen, 2011). However, from the early days of his presidency, Saddam Hussein used religion to justify his external war of aggression against Iran, and gradually, religion became an instrument of political and military mobilization. Consequently, religion turned into a tool for political mobilization as well as an instrument to control the country's social and political structures. In other words, while formally subscribing primarily to pan-Arab secular nationalism, the regime also used religion to justify its rule, boost the legitimacy of the Ba'ath party and to foster Saddam Hussein's support base. Even though Saddam Hussein was notorious in his use of both nationalist and religious rhetoric, he progressively shifted to relying primarily on religion to maintain power, particularly after being defeated in the first Gulf War in 1991. Such duality in the regime's ideological foundations begs the question of what factors explain Saddam Hussein's gradual shift from prioritizing a secular and nationalist ideology of pan-Arabism to a religious ideological framework. To answer this question, this paper will examine the origins of the religious re-orientation of the Ba'ath party, as well as the factors that influenced the Ba'ath regime and its stability in Iraq. Particular attention will be paid to the methods used by Saddam Hussein to keep his control over the people and stay in power.

The origins of the religious turn date back to the war and the need to mobilize society based on a strong religious identity, invoking a message of a division between Sunni Arabs and Shia Persians. While serving its purpose in international politics, the use of religion in domestic affairs contributed to the fragmentation of the Iraqi society along religious and ethnic lines. This, in turn, weakened the social fabric of the Iraqi society and allowed the Hussein regime to strengthen its grip on power and prolong its rule. Hussein achieved this by using different methods with which he was able to create division and weaken the Iraqi society. Hussein's use of religion was evident in various ways. For example, the religious framework was first introduced during the Iran-Iraq War when Hussein named the war after Al Qadisiyyah, the Muslim war against the Persians. Next, Hussein made changes to the Iraqi flag to have an Islamic theme (Podeh, 2011). In addition, Saddam Hussein's religious campaign was one of the most effective methods in imposing a religious framework upon Iraqi citizens through the use of media and changes in the education system. In other words, guided by the principle of divide and rule, Hussein was able to use religion to significantly weaken the secular social structure of the Iraqi society, thereby strengthening and prolonging his rule.

In summary, the research conducted as part of this project indicates that Saddam Hussein used a religious framework to divide the Iraqi people and create sectarian tendencies among Iraqis. The division weakened the social structure of the Iraqi society and allowed Hussein and his regime to remain in power. This strategy proved effective in the end since it allowed Hussein to rule until the second Gulf War in 2003 and turned the Iraqi society into a conservative one grounded in religion. Many academic publications discuss the rule of Saddam Hussein and his administration. However, there is a dearth of

work that examines how Hussein and his government acquired religious themes, particularly Islamic ones, following the eight-year war with Iran during the 1980s.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section discusses the role of religion in maintaining legitimacy and control over the people in various nondemocratic regimes. In a subsequent section, I will review the literature on the topic, focusing on Hussein's use of religion to stay in power. The following section will cover the historical background of Hussein's regime, his rise to power, and how he used the nationalist agenda. Then I will explain how he shifted toward using the religious framework in his military campaigns. The final section will then focus on the analysis of the strategies used by Hussein and assess the effectiveness of the strategies in the long run.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN AUTHORITARIAN STATES: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last few decades, religion visibility in politics of some of the developing countries, particularly in the Middle East, has increased for various reasons. Since some authorities in the Middle East and Central Asia do not follow a democratic way to governor their countries, they understand that they need alternative sources to legitimize their rule (Aurioll & Platteaul, 2015). Employing the concepts of religion and nationalism are deemed effective in the legitimization of political power. Indeed, even in some parts of Europe and Asia, for example, during the 17th century under the influence of nationalist ideology in Germany, Japan, and Russia, the concept of nationalism has often been employed to influence and legitimize political power (Aurioll & Platteaul, 2015). In such cases, significant efforts and sacrifices are frequently justified as being necessary to

preserve traditional integrity and restore national dignity in the face of external pressures and obstacles (Aurioll & Platteaul, 2015). The Assad government in Syria is an appropriate example of using Arab nationalist ideology to legitimize their power since Bashar al-Assad belongs to the Alawites denomination of Shia Islam (i.e., a minority group in Syria.) Thus, using nationalist ideology over religious one is significant in Syria.

Furthermore, according to Kamrava (2020), when the ideology of Marxism was ceasing to exist in Central Asia, the most viable ideological alternatives were nationalism or Islam, both of which emerged in two versions. Nationalism was either ethnic or civic, and Islam was either a core element of culture and a source of ethical and spiritual identity, or a sociopolitical philosophy and a foundation for governmental activity. It developed that civic nationalism and Islam as a source of identity perfectly overlapped and strengthened one another (Kamrava, 2020). Islam did not necessary require governmental support to grow as a social force in Central Asia, while the state's helping posture was undoubtedly a significant causal influence. Kamrava (2020) explains that "across Central Asia, growth in the cultural and political appeal of Islam has depended on several factors, chief among which are the strength of the state and its own approach toward Islam, the state's relatively benign versus capricious authoritarianism, and prevailing social and economic conditions" (p. 16). This is similar to how Islam expanded in Iraq when Hussein began to gradually adopt religious ideological political framework as a new identity of Iraq under the control of the Ba'ath party. In addition, Koesel (2017) examined the connections between religion and authoritarian regimes and developed three models that define this relationship.

The first model of religion and regime that Koesel (2017) explains is that religion-regime connections are thought to be complimentary with both parties benefiting even if not equally. Religion, with its resemblance to the sacred, provides a transcendental validity that the autocrat may use to legitimate their reign. Aurioll and Platteaul (2015) argue that this technique may be more effective in traditional communities where the influence of religion is more prevalent due to a lack of urbanization and a general lack of education among the residents. However, openly declaring loyalty to a specific faith to obtain religious legitimacy may not be sufficient for an authoritarian. As a result, the second religion-regime model implies a more cooperative relationship. Thus, in order to get support for their acts through justifying comments or speeches, an autocrat must also seek to seduce or co-opt religious leaders (Koesel, 2017). As a consequence, religious clerics must be subdued, which means that perks and privileges must be given to them in exchange for their participation (Aurioll & Platteaul, 2015). For example, Adolf Hitler sought to get the support and legitimacy from the Vatican and the Catholic church in Germany when they signed up the Reichskonkordat in September of 1933 (Aurioll & Platteaul, 2017). In truth, German Catholic bishops were usually opposed to the Reich, but the Vatican encouraged them to declare their allegiance to the Nazi authority in order to keep their educational and social institutions open (Aurioll & Platteaul, 2017). This was particularly evident in many countries such as France, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden.

The third model of religion and authoritarian government interactions identifies a significantly more antagonistic relationship. At this end of the range, the relationship is often thought to be one of dominance and resistance (Koesel, 2017). The authoritarian

state strives to constrain religion and religious actors, who in turn seek to undermine autocrats' right and capacity to rule. Conflictual relationships in this paradigm can be influenced by a variety of circumstances. However, religious leaders may provoke conflict if their political theology differs from that of the regime (Koesel, 2017). Iran serves as an example for this model. The use of religion in Iran began with the Iranian society mobilizing and coordinating social movements and actions against the secular Iranian government. After the revolution successfully overthrew the regime, the authority of religious ideological framework moved to the new regime, which was able to rule under religious law. Since Shiites are in the majority in Iran, which is ruled by a religious "Supreme Leader," it was not difficult for its government to control religious institutions and gain their support. Thus, Iranian authorities have managed to rule with an Islamic ideological framework since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979.

This model was also evident in the case of Turkey in the early twentieth century. For instance, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern-Turkey, served as an example of a nationalist in Turkish politics who urged Turks to adopt European ideas and ways of life, which led to the modernization of Turkey (Aurioll & Platteaul, 2015; White, 2017). As a result, religious groups were persecuted by the state, but they nevertheless existed, and popular Islam became a platform for rebellion, resulting in division among Turks (White, 2017). Thus, Turkey has been often seen as unsuccessful when it comes to having a clear national identity to represent all of its society's elements. However, under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan the situation altered radically, with religion moving to the forefront of national policy politics in Turkey, challenging nationalist ideology. Furthermore, prohibiting religious customs, as Atatürk did, created a desire among many

Turks to support politicians such as Erdoğan, who claims to be a devoted Muslim Sunni leader who will serve the best interests of Turkey's Muslim people and restore their social status.

For example, Erdoğan has abolished all religious restrictions that Atatürk imposed during his rule and placed Islam at the centre of Turkey's political life. Similar to the Muslim Brotherhood, Erdogan relies on religion as one of his primary tools for retaining power (Öztürk, 2020). In addition, Erdoğan presents himself as the patriarch of the country, the unquestionably capable, powerful leader. He declares himself to be the personification of milli irade (the national will) and calls on ideal people to uphold the principles of the nation he represents (White, 2017). Erdoğan has also claimed to bring back the glorious days of the Ottoman Empire by embracing Islamic values and adhering to the Islamic identity that distinguishes Turkey from neighbouring European countries (Öztürk, 2020). One can plainly discern that Turkey wears a religious identity due to the Erdoğan party and government openly supporting and using religion (Öztürk, 2020). Erdoğan's methods in employing religion to legitimize his authority are similar to the methods used by Hussein in the 1990s. According to Reid (1993), Saddam Hussein also used religion to strengthen his rule and promote himself as "a larger-than-life leader."

Devlin (1995) and Abdi (2008) note that Saddam Hussein developed a cult of personality and established a national identity by using elements from ancient Mesopotamia to promote his ideology. While Devlin (1995) argues that Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath party utilized ancient Mesopotamian symbols in the beginning of their regime, and then once their power was on the rise, they showed more support for Pan-

Arabism for their political gain. However, Abdi (2008) developed a different argument as he examines:

> During his career Mr. Hussein came to be associated with many historical figures, from Sa'd ibn abi-Waqqass, the commander of the Muslim army who defeated the Sasanid Persians at the Battle of Qadisiyyah, to Salah al-Din, the founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty who fought the Crusaders. However, it seems that his heart really belonged with ancient Mesopotamian figures (pp. 24–26).

While the first half of Abdi's assertion is valid since Saddam Hussein was renowned for frequently glorifying the victories of Muslim historical leaders in his speech, the author does not make any distinctions between Hussein's association with Muslim historical figures and religious propaganda. Furthermore, while Saddam Hussein relied on ancient Mesopotamian kings at some point during his presidency, nonetheless, his emphasis was largely on Arab Muslim figures due to his identity as an Arab Muslim president. Additionally, as someone who grew up in Iraq, I recall Saddam Hussein and the mainstream media making more use of Arab Muslim victories than ancient Mesopotamian ones.

Dawisha (1999) argues that Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath party tried multiple identities to serve their political needs to enable them to continue ruling the country. For instance, they adopted an Arab nationalist identity during the Iran-Iraq War; they switched to an Islamic identity during the Gulf War; and, after being defeated in the Gulf War, they heavily relied on the tribal identity to maintain their power base (Dawisha, 1999). This argument has major structural flaws due to the fact that it assumes tribal

identity was the strongest feature in Iraq, despite the fact that Iraq is not a tribal system-based country. Empowering tribes in Iraq, particularly in the southern provinces might have threatened Saddam Hussein's regime and led to an insurgency. Lewental (2014) critiques Dawisha and states that Saddam Hussein continued to dress in Arab-Islamist garb for the remainder of his rule; by 1998, the man who had once been known as simply "the leader" (al-qaid) became "Mr. President, the leader victorious according to God's will" (as-sayyid ar-rais al-qaid al-mansur bi-llah), recycling a common phrase of early Muslim rulers. Nevertheless, Lewental (2014) does not make any claims on how the increasing of Arab-Islamist ideology was received by Iraqis and if it resulted in sectarianism and civil war across the country. Furthermore, Matthews (2015) in his review of Joseph Sassoon's work states that Saddam Hussein built relationships with Arab tribes; however, he argues:

> Marr claims that Saddam allowed the Ba'ath Party to deteriorate and relied for support instead on his own extended family and networks of Arab tribes, especially after the 1991 Gulf War. Sassoon, however, establishes that the party's membership and responsibilities did not diminish during the period of economic sanctions after the war and that the party displayed extraordinary flexibility and responsiveness to changing conditions. He explains that although the regime abandoned its former hostility to tribalism and cultivated relations with Iraqi tribal leaders after the war, the party continued to successfully recruit new members, run party schools and conferences, and sponsor public festivals. The party, in fact, took some responsibility for managing the state's relationship with the tribes. (p. 389).

This argument is more accurate due to the fact that the Ba'ath party thrived in Iraq until the American invasion in 2003. Matthews (2015) also contends that Saddam Hussein used Islam as a tool to maintain power through the religious campaign, rather than because Saddam was religious. Similarly, I assert how an authoritarian president like Saddam Hussein would use religion for the sole purpose of legitimizing his rule. In addition, the political economy of two wars, an overreach made possible by the massive increase in Iraq's oil revenues between 1972 and 1980 followed by their massive decline during the 1980s, and the 1991–2003 United Nations sanctions regime, according to Davis (2018), were the main factors that caused Saddam to abandon pan-Arabism and adopt a new ideological position, in this case, religion. Saddam Hussein adopted this ideology not out of conviction but rather, as a means of gaining leverage in his attempt to make Iraq the dominant power in the Arab world. Therefore, the external pressures exemplified in the Iran-Iraq war and the First Gulf War, coupled with internal dynamics of national politics, created the conditions for the gradual shift from favouring pan-Arabism to an emphasis on religion. However, Davis (2018) states that Saddam Hussein's main ideology was not Arab nationalism nor Islamism, but rather tribalist instrumentalism:

> Saddam trusted very few people and then only those in his immediate circle with whom he had kinship relations, namely his immediate family members and members of his tribal clan, the Bayjat of the Albu Nasir. […] Saddam constantly applied a cost-benefit analysis to any decision he took, based on whether it would enhance or diminish his power. In this sense, neither Saddam's "Ba'athism" nor Islamism really were key drivers in his decision-making process, if by drivers we

> mean decision-making caused by affective commitment. I would argue that Saddam switched ideologies to whatever suited him at a particular point in time (p. 329).

Davis (2018) examines Saddam Hussein's mentality and the strategies he used to maintain his hegemony. Similarly, the examination can be used to explain Saddam Hussein's religious ideology and how religion for him was an instrument to gain power and strengthen his rule. Davis (2018) emphasizes the failure of Saddam Hussein's immediate family's religious campaign but fails to examine the impact of this campaign on Iraqi society in terms of making them more conservative and religious or dividing them, given that Iraq is a country of various religions and ethnicities. In addition, Bunton (2008) agrees with Davis when they mention the methods and the linkages that Saddam Hussein made to ancient Mesopotamia and Muslim historical wars to gain the support from all Iraqi Muslims, including the Kurds and Shia populations. However, Bunton (2008) disregards the Islamic ideology that Saddam Hussein developed through his religious campaign, as he does not address the division that this campaign created among Iraqis.

Furthermore, Podeh (2010) examines the transition of Saddam Hussein from secularism to religious ideology through the national holidays, which Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath party focused on to legitimize their needs and interests. For instance, Podeh (2010) claims that Saddam Hussein began using Islamic symbols more frequently in the 1980s, though, after the Iranian Shia Revolution in 1979, and the start of the Iran-Iraq War, in an effort to win over his Islamic-Shi'i audience. While it is accurate that Saddam Hussein feared the Shia upraising in Iraq after the Iranian Revelation, the use of

religious holidays and symbols was not only used to gain Shia support but also to legitimize any action he and his administration took. Despite the use of religious speeches, Podeh (2010) argues that the content of the anniversaries mostly remained secular, therefore the use of religious discourse did not imply that festivities were Islamized. However, the eventual result was a blend of Mesopotamian, Islamic, and pan-Arabic symbols. Podeh (2010) does not deeply examine Saddam Hussein's rhetoric in post-Gulf War in 1991 and how much he emphasized the religious elements.

Franzén (2011) focuses on Iraq's national identity and how Saddam Hussein termed the war against Iran by 'Saddam's Qadisiyyah' because, from this perspective, Saddam viewed the battle as the inevitable result of 'Arabs' and 'Persians' long-standing animosity. The argument here is referring to ethnic issues between Arabs and Persians. Franzén (2011) pays little attention to Saddam Hussein's use of religion, whether through speech, religious campaigns, changing the Iraqi flag, or other factors showing a shift from pan-Arabism to Islamization. In their evaluation of Helfont's book, Ali al-Maliki and Baram (2019) critique Helfont's claim that there were no doctrinal changes in Iraq's Ba'ath party from its rise to its fall. They claim that in order to secure his position, Saddam Hussein turned from secularism and Pan-Arabism to Islamic ideology in the 1990s.

The authors present evidence for their assertion, such as the religious campaign and Sharia law that Saddam Hussein introduced into Iraq's legal system. Nonetheless, the primary issue with their analysis and argument is that they ignore the impact of Islamic ideology on Iraqi society components such as minority groups. To some extent, Ali al-Maliki and Baram (2019) claim is accurate since Saddam Hussein adopted new policies

and campaigns following the first Gulf War. However, they overlook the evidence provided by Helfont (2018) that Saddam Hussein continuously had a vision of constructing his own version of Islamic Ba'athist ideology. Indeed, the early days of his presidency, Saddam Hussein associated himself with Muslim historical leaders, depicting the war against Iran as the war between Arab Sunni Muslims and the Persian infidels. Nonetheless, Helfont (2018) failed to acknowledge Saddam Hussein's significant move from relying significantly on pan-Arab nationalist to religious ideology throughout the 1990s. There is accuracy in assuming that Saddam Hussein continuously used religion to his advantage, and that Michel Aflaq, the Christian founder of the Ba'ath party, had always expressed admiration for Islam, and some believed that he converted to it before his death; however, Hussein revealed a significant adoption of political Islam once he was in a weak position following the first Gulf War. As a result, neither argument addressed all of the available materials, which would have aided in the formulation of a better and more accurate argument. Additionally, Helfont (2018) failed to address how Saddam Hussein's religious policies resulted in division, sectarianism, and a fragile society in Iraq. He also does not mention minority groups such as Christians, Yazidis, and even Jews and if they were able to practice their religions and ethnicities without being oppressed by the Ba'athists or terrorist groups later. To sum up, Iraq is an extremely diverse society: multiethnic and multiconfessional. Ruling over such complex society posed significant challenges to Iraqi leaders. Saddam Hussein chose first to promote pan-Arabism, but gradually came to rely more extensively on Islam. And after the defeat in the war, Saddam Hussein chose to develop his own unique brand of Ba'athist Islam.

It is clear that religion plays a significant role in nondemocratic regimes as one of the instruments for political and social control. In the case of Turkey and Iraq, religious was utilized to gain power and legitimize the dictator leaders' actions. The current scholarly works have gaps in regard to Saddam Hussein's gradual shift from nationalism and pan-Arabism to a religious ideological framework and how that had affected the Iraqi people, particularly minority groups. Some scholars tend not to acknowledge that shift at all. Thus, it is critical to examine the origins of the strategies and transitions that exacerbated all the tensions among Iraqis, particularly after the 2003 war. It is also vital to explore Hussein's background, including how he rose to power in 1979 and how he remained in power until the American invasion in 2003.

SADDAM HUSSEN'S HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is critical to understand who Saddam Hussein was and how he came to be the president of Iraq in order to comprehend the shift in his regime's ideology and what caused it. Saddam Hussein was born in April in 1937 in Tikrit, a village in central Iraq. According to Post (1991), he joined the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party in Iraq at the age of 20 in 1956, after being inspired by Nasser (i.e., the Egyptian president at the time), and quickly impressed party officials with his enthusiasm. Saddam Hussein then took part in an assassination attempt against Iraq's ruler, General Abdul Karim Qasim, in 1959 (Post, 1991). The failed assassination resulted in his exile from Iraq, and lived in Egypt for four years (Abdi, 2008). After the Ba'ath party took control in a military coup in 1963, he returned to Baghdad (Abdi, 2008). Nine months later, the Ba'athists were unsuccessful and got defeated. As a result, Saddam Hussein got imprisoned but continued to get elected as the Ba'ath party's deputy secretary-general while still in prison. Moreover,

Abdul Mohammed Aref got deposed by the Ba'ath party in 1968, and Saddam Hussein became the party's runner-up. Following, Saddam Hussein signed a border treaty with the Shah of Iran in 1975, but the Shah then supported Kurdish insurgencies against the Ba'ath regime. Ahmed Hassan Al-Bakr resigned in July 1979, and Saddam Hussein became the president of Iraq.

From his early days as the president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein was emphasizing and employing Arab nationalism. Therefore, he and his Ba'ath party developed the Arabization policy. According to Baram (1983), Saddam Hussein desired to make everything related to the Arab history in Iraq to the point that he wanted to change the history of Mesopotamia when he inquired Iraqi historians to examine the history of Iraq from another perspective:

> The history of the Arab nation does not start with Islam. Rather, it reaches back into ages of remote antiquity .... All basic civilizations that emerged in the Arab homeland were expressions of the personality of the sins of the [Arab] nation, who emerged from one single source. [Even] if these ancient civilizations had some indigenous attributes, [it should be said that] the *watani* personality is nothing but a part of the more general and total pan-Arab character (p. 439).

In addition, the Ba'ath regime drove hundreds of thousands of Kurds, Turkmen, and Assyrian Christians from territories around Mosul, Kirkuk, and Khanaqin beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing until right before the 2003 Iraq war. Sunni and Shiite Arabs from the south were then lured in with economic incentives, usually a 10,000 Dinar cash payment and free or subsidized homes and property acquired from the

regime's exiled people (Romano, 2005). Furthermore, as a part of the Arabization policy, non-Arabs such as Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, and Turkmans were demanded to renounce their ethnicity, which resulted in protests, and some had to flee the country (Hanish, 2011). I argue that this was the starting point of sectarianism in Iraq since the people of minority groups felt that they cannot live freely in Iraq due to their non-Arabic ethnicity. One of the reasons for Arabization policy was the Islamic Iranian Revolution in 1979. Saddam Hussein was concerned about the destabilizing effects of the Iranian Revolution on Iraq since the share of the Shia population in Iraq amounted to almost 60 percent. He was thinking of a way to keep the Shiites loyal to him and not to join the Islamic Dawa party, which is a Shia Islamist political party founded by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Additionally, since Saddam Hussein was promoting Arab nationalist ideological framework instead of a religious one such as the one in Iran, which many Muslims not only Shiites but also Sunnis longed for, he understood that his sovereignty might be challenged by the Iraqis. According to Helfont (2018), Saddam Hussein's fears and concerns were well-founded since Iran began deploying militants to Iraq and encouraging Iraqi Shiites to join the Dawa party. Thus, Saddam Hussein wanted to take advantage of Iran’s social instability at that time by launching a lengthy war.

The Iraqi Iranian war began in September of 1980. Saddam Hussein and his Ba’ath administration decided to name their eight-year war with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the twentieth century's longest conventional war in developing countries, 'Saddam's Qadisiya' or Qadisiyyat-Saddam (QS) (Dawisha, 1999; Lewental, 2014; Davis, 2018). It was no coincidence that the fight against Iran was compared to the battle of al-Qadisiya, in which an Arab Muslim army defeated the Iranian Sassanids in 637 A.D. and went on

to seize Ctesiphon, the Sassanid capital on the banks of the Tigris River, and exile the Persians from Iraq (Reid, 1993; Dawisha, 1999). Indeed, this was the Ba'ath's propaganda used to gain the support of the Arab and Muslim world. During the war, through his rhetoric, Saddam Hussein was attempting to persuade the Arab world, particularly Iraqis and Shiites, that he was battling not only a non-Arabic state, but also a non-Sunni state, a Shiite state, and, most significantly, Shiite Rafidis (Shiite rejecters). Helfont (2018) asserts that Saddam Hussein had to implement a religious program to convince the Shiite soldiers that the Ba'athists were also Muslims, not only secularists, in order for them to remain loyal to him. Helfont's (2018) argument aids in understanding the connection between Saddam Hussein and Islam in late 1980s until his last days in 2003.

Moreover, Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath party continued promoting Arab nationalism ideology in various ways. For instance, he had criticized the United States' military presence in Saudi Arabia as yet another instance of foreign involvement. He has pledged to "pluck out the eyes" of any country that assaults the Arab world, referring to himself as the "sword of the Arabs" (Tarshis, 1990). These remarks have a tremendous appeal to many Arabs who have been disappointed by decades of international interference and military defeat by Israel. Thus, according to Tarshis (1990), many Palestinians protesters in the West Bank of Israel would shout "Saddam is coming! He's on his way! Saddam is going to sweep you away" (p. 15). Ironically, throughout the war with Iran, which killed a million people, the United States backed Iraq (Gray, 2010). Reid (1993) explains how Hussein had different methods to promote himself, particularly using stamps with his image, which were part of his propaganda forms.

Moreover, Reid (1993) states that it was evident that when the war with Iran was not proceeding in favour of his authority and regime, Saddam Hussein needed to draw support from religious institutions; thus, he made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein's Qadissiya stamps appealed to have both religious and Arab nationalism to some Sunni people because as Reid (1993) states "the original seventh-century battle was not just a victory of Arabs over Persians, but also of Muslims over unbelievers" (p. 87). Furthermore, Iran and Iraq concluded a cease-fire agreement in August 1988 (Post, 1991). In the same year in March, the Iraqi army strikes Halabjah and gasses over 40 villages resulting in killing 5,000 Kurdish and Assyrian people (Palkki & Rubin, 2021).

In August 1990, two years after the end of the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein invaded and annexed Kuwait (Tarshis, 1990). By invading an Arabic country, Saddam Hussein violated the Arab nationalist rhetoric that had been his party's ideology prior. This implies that Saddam Hussein was more concerned with his own authority than with pan-Arabism and the fate of the Arab nation. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein used the religious elite to justify the invasion and maintain collaboration with the war effort. In January 1991, the US-led operation "desert storm" drove the Iraqi army out of Kuwait (Byman et al., 1998). After being defeated by the US and its allies and with all the United Nations' economic sanctions, Saddam Hussein was in an unstable position with a lot of questions regarding his legitimacy.

By the end of the first Gulf War, religion had taken on a larger role in Saddam Hussein's ideological framework, with the emergence of Islamic Ba'athism as a means of bolstering Saddam Hussein's legitimacy and extending his reign. At the time, Iraq was a

divided country, with the US supporting the Kurds in the north by giving them an autonomous zone and the Iranians backing up the Shiites in the south during the Shia uprising and then who were persecuted by Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath party (Byman et al., 1998). Davis (2018) states that “Saddam had long realized that pan-Arab nationalism was dead, the realization of which was forcefully brought home when he became isolated during the leadup to the Gulf War” (p. 329). Thus, he began using a religious ideological framework or what Helfont (2018) calls, Saddam Hussein’s brand of Islamic Ba’athism in Iraq more than Arab nationalist one. At this point, Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athists were fighting for survival and to regain control over the country (Byman et al., 1998).

One of the most controversial methods Saddam performed to convince people that he was an Arab Muslim leader, according to Helfont (2018), was a written version of the Quran in his own blood. This version of the Quran was displayed in the Umm al-Ma'arik ("Mother of All Battles") mosque that was built to commemorate Saddam Hussein's self-proclaimed victory in the 1991 Gulf War and as a personal monument to Saddam Hussein (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018). Saddam Hussein elevated the fascination with leader-heroes to unprecedented heights. Throughout his presidency, he was obsessed with associating himself with several historical Muslim leaders, from Saad ibn abi-Waqqass, the commander of the Muslim army that defeated the Sassanid Persians at the Battle of Al-Qadisiya, to Salah Al-Din, the founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty who fought the Crusaders. (Abdi, 2008). This was accomplished through the use of stamps, speeches, school history books, and the naming of streets and provinces after these individuals. In

addition to his image as a military leader, Saddam Hussein portrays himself as a devout Muslim who touches the black stone of the Kaaba during a hajj to Mecca (Reid, 1993).

Another significant change that Saddam Hussein made was adding his handwriting of the phrase "Allahu Akbar" (God is greater) to the Iraqi flag on January 13, 1991, prior to the first Gulf War (Podeh, 2011). Furthermore, Podeh (2011) notes in this sense, Saddam Hussein retained pan-Arab symbols while incorporating a substantial Islamic aspect aimed at mobilizing the support and legitimacy of Muslims, particularly the Shia population in Iraq. In addition, to fight the resistance of Shia and Kurds and to gain a full control over the main sects of Islam, Sunnism and Shi'ism, Saddam Hussein initiated the Faith Campaign in 1993 (al-hamla al-imaniyya) to gain international Sunni support for lifting the economic sanctions, which lasted until the eve of the 2003 Iraq war (Ali al-Maliki & Baram, 2019; Brill, 2020). However, emphasis on the Sunni version of Islam in fact contributed to further divisions in Iraq's multiethnic and multiconfessional society.

The Faith Campaign examines the Gulf War's aftermath, especially the ruthless repression of sectarian uprisings that erupted in its wake including the Shia uprising in the southern provinces. Saddam's Faith Campaign included emphasis on the teaching of Islam in different strategies (Ali al-Maliki & Baram, 2019). For examples, senior officials began memorizing the Quran and carrying prayer beads; talent contests for Quranic chanting were held; the state committed more funding to religious education in the educational system; an all-male Islamic university opened in 1998; and releasing prisoners who memorize sections of the Quran (Lewental, 2014). Even Ba'ath party members were compelled to undergo new mandatory Islamic courses (Brill, 2020). In

addition, Helfont (2018) argues that “by 1993, the regime felt confident to deploy a cadre of its own religious leaders” (pp. 132–33). These religious leaders were positioned in mosques and religious institutions across the country with the task of teaching the Ba’athist version of Islam. As a result, Iraqi Muslims were becoming more religious not necessarily because that is what they wanted to become, but rather because of the fear they had from not obeying the rules of the Faith Campaign. Iraqi TV channels began providing space for religious programs and prayers. Female TV broadcasters were encouraged to wear hijab especially during the month of Ramadan. In addition, intimate scenes were cut from films and TV series and alcohol drinks scenes were also blurred. All the religious attention and emphasis on the mainstream media was dedicated to the Sunni Islam only.

Furthermore, Saddam Hussein won a presidential referendum in 1995, with official estimates giving him more than 99 percent of the vote, and again in 2002, with 100 percent of the vote (Al-Jazeera, 2006). He apologized for invading Kuwait in December 2002; however, Kuwait refused to accept his apologies. His apology was more likely due to his concern of the possible American invasion, which happened a few months later. He also denied having chemical or nuclear weapons and rejected any ties to al-Qaeda in early 2003 (Al-Jazeera, 2006). According to Lewental (2014), Saddam Hussein referred to the American President George W. Bush as the "Hulegu of the Age," referring to the Mongol monarch who stormed Baghdad in 1258 and asked his followers to uphold the spirit of al-Qadisiyyah and other early Islamic battles and leaders. He also continued referring to the West as Crusaders and infidels. Moreover, Saddam Hussein was using both Arab nationalist and religious ideologies through his rhetoric to seek

support of Arabic and Muslim countries. By the conclusion of his reign, Saddam's entire acceptance of Arab-Islamism and even general Islamic themes became obvious (Lewental, 2014).

On March 20th, 2003, a US-led coalition invaded Iraq despite the lack of a UN resolution authorizing the invasion, and on April 9th, 2003, US troops invaded Baghdad. A few months later, on December 13th, 2003, US officials announced Saddam Hussein's capture, causing a public shock among Iraqi citizens. Saddam Hussein's trial began a year later in August 2005, and he was found guilty and sentenced to death for crimes against humanity in November 2006 (Al-Jazeera, 2006). On December 26th, 2006, the Iraqi court of appeals upheld Saddam Hussein's death sentence. He was hanged on December 30, 2006, at Camp Justice, an Iraqi base in Baghdad, despite his wish to be shot (similar to military leaders.) There was a controversy about his execution due to the fact that it took place on the first day of Eid Al-Adha, the most important Islamic holiday. In fact, Islam forbids the killing of Muslims on holidays. Thus, Saddam Hussein became a "martyr" for so many Arabs and Muslims, especially the anti-US forces in Iraq.

ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Saddam Hussein's use of religious framework was successful since it allowed him to remain in power for more than a decade after the first Gulf War. The main reason for Saddam Hussein's new religious ideology was not to repent after invading Kuwait and experiencing a reconversion moment, as Baram argues (Matthews, 2015), but rather to regain the Sunni and Shiite support and loyalty as well as to justify his invasion and legitimize his control over the country. The adaptation served Saddam Hussein's goal,

which was to remain in power and strengthen his sovereignty. As Helfont (2018) states, Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath party adopted Islamic teachings and promoted political Islamic ideology from the early days which was present during the war with Iran. However, the massive support for religious ideological framework became clearly known, especially on the mainstream media following the first Gulf War in 1991, and up to the last day before the second Gulf War in 2003.

As a result, the Iraqi society became more conservative in general. For instance, religious dress and style such as veils and beards became more common (Lewental, 2014) not only among Muslims, but among non-Muslims as well. Iraq witnessed an increasing number of women wearing hijab. This had an impact on non-Muslim women, in which their clothing style became more conservative. Thus, despite their religious backgrounds, women in Iraq wore long and oversized clothes to protect themselves and appear modest to feel part of the same society. In addition, since Saddam Hussein was a Sunni Muslim, Sunnis felt privileged and were guaranteed better positions than other Iraqi citizens, especially if they were members of the Ba'ath party. As for the Shiites, they were suffering from poor living conditions such as the lack of potable water, lack of adequate food, hygiene, and medical care. The Kurds were living in the northern provinces, which Saddam lost control over.

The Assyrian Christians were lost in the middle; some living under Ba'athist regime, and some under the Kurdish government. In both cases, they were not guaranteed any rights or governmental positions. Furthermore, when Saddam Hussein would describe the West as an infidel and crusaders, many Iraqi Christians felt that he was attacking them as well. Other minority groups such as the Yazidis and Mandaeans were

experiencing poor living standards, and later on, many were forced to practice their religion in secret. Moreover, the Faith Campaign had a major impact on minority groups in various ways. For example, at some point, Assyrian Christians were forbidden from naming their children Christian names that were found in the Bible. Minority groups holidays were not publicly celebrated in many cities and people were forced to go to work and schools on their holidays. During the fasting hours of Ramadan, all food stores were closed. Since many provinces names were changed to Muslim historical war names to give them a more of an Islamic theme, many people from minority groups felt excluded from these regions. Even the Iraqi flag with Allahu Akbar phrase meant to be representing Islam more than Iraqis.

All of that resulted in sectarianism among the Iraqi society. One of the driving forces for sectarianism was that the ruling elite in Iraq were Sunnis, particularly from Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's birth town (Dawisha, 1999). Indeed, it became evident that if people were Sunni Ba'athist, they were able to hold the positions they desired and applied for. Therefore, minority groups were treated as second-class citizens. I argue that this division was tactfully created by Hussein to incite divisions among Iraqi citizens. When Hussein favoured Sunnis, especially the strong tribal ones, he gained their support and loyalty, while the minority groups were getting weaker by being neglected from the government. This way, Hussein was able to rule the country strongly since the strongest type of Iraqis (the Sunni tribes), were his supporters and the rest of Iraqis had no power to resist. Thus, when Saddam Hussein's regime ended, Shiites took over the government and the majority of the parliament seats. Sunnis and Ba'athists were furious after the loss of their benefits and privileged status as the ruling class; therefore, a lot of Sunni tribal

shaykhs joined with the Saddam Hussein's regime supporters and with the foreign-born Salafi fighters who had arrived in Iraq to fight the infidels (Byman & Pollack, 2008). Travis (2006) claims that hundreds of thousands of Assyrians escaped Iraq from 1979 to 2003, during Saddam Hussein's reign. As a result, since 1991, more than half of the Assyrian population had to flee from Iraq. Additionally, Travis (2006) states:

> The Kurdish regions of Iraq and Turkey were subject to ‘‘ethnic cleansing’’ for over a decade, as the Kurds have driven tens of thousands of Assyrians and Chaldeans into exile, and yet Western commentators persist in their naive belief that the Kurds are the only oppressed people in the region (p. 346).

The Kurds’ persecution against Assyrian Christians is a clear example of sectarianism in Iraq that has been occurring since Saddam Hussein’s era. Although the Kurds were aware that Assyrian Christians were oppressed by the Ba’ath party, they were still intolerant with them. Consequently, fleeing the country and immigrating to another one became the first choice for so many people of minority groups. Ali al-Maliki and Baram (2019) argue that because of the Faith Campaign Hussein’s oldest son Uday and his comrades thought that Baghdad was becoming a second Riyadh. Considering all the funding and support that Hussein’s Ba’ath administration was providing to the religious institutions to promote the Sunni version of Islam and praise the old days and historical figures of the Islamic days, it is safe to say that it resulted in preparing fertile ground for Islamist insurgencies in 2003 (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018; Ali al-Maliki & Baram, 2019). In addition, Helfont (2018) contends that many Ba’ath party members were affiliated with Wahabism and Salafism secretly because they could not announce it publicly, especially in the first decade of Hussein’s rule when he was supporting Arab

nationalism. Their aim was to join the Ba'ath party and get a good career position afterward.

Moreover, Hussein's rhetoric against the West and the use of language such as infidels and crusaders and all the emphasis on how they were the enemy of Arab Muslims, created major aggression towards the West. According to Helfont (2018), Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime had complete authority over all religious institutions from the early 1990s until the American invasion in 2003. Therefore, these institutions were fighting the American invasion while also supporting Saddam Hussein and his administration, but the West was unaware of the fact since they assumed Saddam Hussein supported Arab nationalism and secularism. All that primed many people certainly for the crime of aggression and terrorist attacks starting in 2003 whether against the Western coalition forces or the Iraqi people who did not ally with the same views and resulted in a long brutal civil war, which led to massive immigration and the destruction of many parts of Iraq. Therefore, Hussein's promotion of political Islam through Faith Campaign as a driving force to ensure that he would continue ruling after being isolated from most of the Arab world, worked perfectly for his own advantages and was one of the main reasons of division and sectarianism among the Iraqi people.

CONCLUSION

Religion plays an important role in promoting authoritarian rule and legitimacy. Indeed, when used, religion provides opportunities for the ruling class to gain political legitimacy, which may be especially useful for autocrats facing challenges from below. In exchange for bolstering authoritarian authority, political elites may designate one faith as

the official religion, offer financial incentives, or grant freedoms denied to other religious organizations and institutions. Consequently, special government jobs and advisory roles for clergy may be created, and religious employees, seminaries, and faith-based charities' wages may be subsidized, with the purpose of fostering collective conformity and cultivating reliance (Koesel, 2017). The relationship between religion and authoritarian regimes identifies a significantly more antagonistic relationship, where authoritarians fear the mobilization of religious groups who threaten their reign. This was experienced during the Islamic Iranian Revolution of 1979. Throughout history, authoritarian regimes have exploited nationalist and religious beliefs to legitimize their actions and re-assert their sovereignty, particularly during wars and struggle.

As mentioned in this paper, religion, along with nationalism, served the purpose of prolonging the regime in Iraq. Saddam Hussein's political ideological strategies in the early days were mainly grounded in pan-Arab nationalism. Due to Iraq's diverse society of multiple religions and ethnicities, Hussein's Arab nationalist ideological framework began changing gradually. While Arab nationalist ideology was still the core of the Ba'ath party's beliefs, the new slightly shift began during the Iran-Iraq war, when Hussein was including religious rhetoric in his public speeches. The Islamic Iranian Revolution in 1979 raised concerns for Hussein's regime. Many Arabs including Sunnis support the revolution and hoped to be exported across the Middle East. Thus, to justify his war against Iran (a Muslim Shiite country), Hussein named the war 'Saddam's Qadisiya' (Dawisha, 1999; Lewental, 2014; Davis, 2018), drawing a straight connection to the first Islamic Qadisiya war against the Sasanians who were defeated. By doing that, Hussein gained a lot of support from Iraqis Sunnis in particular and Arab Sunnis in

general. However, Hussein invaded Kuwait and then was forced to withdraw from it by the US coalitions, resulted in the First Gulf War and direct threats to the sovereignty of the Ba'ath regime by the Shia and Kurdish uprising, Hussein understood that he was no longer the great Arab leader for so many Iraqis and Arabs and that pan-Arab nationalism was not the best ideology to use to keep him in power (Matthews, 2015; Davis, 2018). Hussein's position was challenged, and he had to employ another strategy to secure his position and regain Iraqis' support.

He relied heavily on religious ideological framework by launching the Faith Campaign in the early 1990s. Religious institutions received massive amounts of funding for spreading Islamic teachings among Iraqi citizens. Religious universities were created, and the Ba'ath was responsible for appointing religious leaders to serve the message that the Ba'ath wanted to deliver to Iraqis. Bars and night clubs were shut down and prostitutes were persecuted. As a result, people tended to become more religious and more conservative. More women began wearing hijab and working as religious teachers at schools. People who memorized the Quran were given more benefits and Sunnis were privileged just because they were practicing the Sunni version of Islam. With that being the case, minority groups who were not Muslims were left out and treated as second-class citizens. This indicates that division and sectarianism emerged in Iraq under Hussein's era and got intensified after the 2003 war. The Faith Campaign policies lasted before the Iraq War in 2003 and had a massive impact on the Islamist insurgencies that followed the war (Helfont, 2018; Ali al-Maliki & Baram, 2019).

Hussein's religious strategies were successful in the end since he managed to remain in power, gained the Sunni tribals' support, which enabled him to control and rule

the country. Further examination is required of the various aspects of the Faith Campaign and its impact on all Iraqi citizens, but particularly women. It is vital to shed some light on the connections that the campaign had with sectarianism and Islamist militants, which occurred in post 2003 Iraq war and resulted in violent acts, civil war, and the immigration of millions of Iraqis.

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