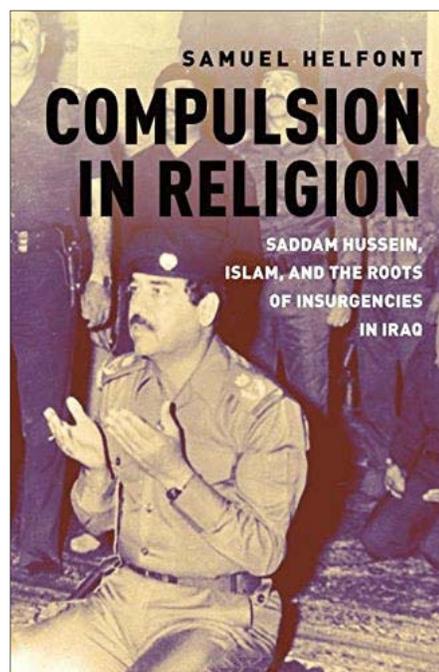


Saddam Hussein's Islamization of Party and State

by Ban Ali al-Maliki and Amatzia Baram

Compulsion in Religion: Saddam Hussein, Islam, and the Roots of Insurgencies in Iraq. By Samuel Helfont. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 304 pp. \$34.95.

A fascinating debate on state-Islam relations in Baath Iraq has raged between historians ever since two archives of internal Iraqi Baath records were made available to researchers in the United States. Some researchers believe the records testify that, from the day the Baath regime came to power in Baghdad in 1968 until its demise in 2003, it was always staunchly secular. This view sees the regime's Islamization "Faith Campaign" (*al-hamla al-imaniyya*, 1993-2003) as a mirage.¹ Another view believes the party and regime were indeed secular, but that the 1979 rise of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini forced them to gradually Islamize both the party and the state. This process culminated in the "Faith Campaign."² A third and very different thesis is developed in Helfont's book.



Compulsion in Religion is primarily an analysis of the Baath regime's approach to Islam under the rule of Saddam Hussein, 1979-2003. It is based mostly on the two Baath archives available in the United States: the Conflict Records Research Center at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C., and the Baath Regional Command Collection at the Hoover Institution. The heart of the book deals with Saddam's "Faith Campaign." The final section investigates the connection between the campaign and post-Saddam insurgencies.

¹ Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 260.

² See, for example, Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 251-94.

The book has merits. Its novel treatment of Saddam's approach to the Iraqi Christian community adds to our knowledge. Likewise, it provides good information on the regime's approach to the Shiite clerical class in the 1990s. Despite these merits, there remain six substantive issues with Helfont's central thesis and his treatment of the evidence.

The book's starting point is the approach to Islam in Baath ideology and practice from the party's inception in the 1940s to the end of the first decade of Baath rule in Iraq (1968-78). This early history, critical to Helfont's thesis, is based entirely on well-known, open sources. The first problem is methodology. Helfont ignores a number of critical sources that disprove his thesis. This same problem also reappears later in the book.

The second problem is also methodological but with larger ramifications: When should the study of the Baath regime begin? By 1970, Vice President Saddam Hussein was already the main decision-maker, and Helfont should have begun his study from 1968, rather than from 1979. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to gauge correctly Saddam's decisions in the 1980s and 1990s without a comprehensive study of his policies in the 1970s.

Misunderstanding Aflaq

The third problem is Helfont's misrepresentation of the ideology of Baath party founder Michel Aflaq. Helfont's central thesis is that "with some variations," between Aflaq's creation of the party in the 1940s and its demise in 2003, Baath ideology regarding state-Islam relations never changed. This means that the accepted belief—that beginning in the mid-1980s but mainly the

Helfont ignores a number of critical sources that disprove his thesis.

1990s, the Baath performed an ideological about-face from secularism to Saddam-style Islamism³—is mistaken.

Based exclusively on previously-known, open sources, Helfont believes that Aflaq, the party's Christian founder, formulated an "interpretation of Islam." But his interpretation of Aflaq is confusing. Was Aflaq a secret Muslim? An Islamic reformer? Helfont states Aflaq "had deep love for Islam" and wanted to incorporate much of it into his ideology. Such a counter-intuitive analysis needs a solid empirical base, which is absent.

Helfont quotes some of Aflaq's texts but ignores others. Likewise, he ignores other critical Baath sources, as well as the context: For Aflaq and his non-Sunni Arab colleagues—Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Shiites—an Arab-Islamic mega-state would mean a defeat in their quest for civil equality. To avoid isolation in a Muslim-majority society, Aflaq paid lavish lip-service to God, the Prophet, and Islam as part of Arab history. Later, he bemoaned it. This rhetoric, however, did not confuse the core of his secular supporters nor his Islamist enemies: Both understood that the party was promoting secularism. It did, however, confuse Helfont.

Helfont's claim of Aflaq's "deep love for Islam" collapses under the weight of the very partial evidence he provides. He quotes Aflaq correctly: "Maybe we [Baathists] are not seen praying with the ones who pray, or

³ See, for example, Eric Davis, "Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968–2003: Ba'ithi Iraq from Secularism to Faith" by Amatzia Baram (review)," *The Middle East Journal*, Spring 2018, pp. 327–30; Joseph Sassoon, "The Iraqi Baath Party Preparatory School," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Jan. 2014, p. 38.

fasting with the ones who fast, but we believe in God.” Helfont explains that Aflaq’s interpretation of Islam excluded “the scriptural or legal base of the Islamic tradition,” but we are not told what this means. By stripping Islam of its most important precepts, or “pillars” (*arkan*), Aflaq implied waving other aspects of Shari‘a, like the “forbidden” (*al-munkarat*), that includes the consumption of spirits. Aflaq, therefore, rejected Islam as a practiced religion.

Additionally, even though Helfont does not report it, Aflaq insisted on “the secularism of the state” in which all religions are equal and separated from the state. Calling upon Christian Arabs to admire Islam for its role in Arab history, Aflaq also equated the glory of Arab Islam with that of heathen “Arab” Babylon and of Arabic poetry before the advent of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad’s “message,” he clarified, does not end “at a certain time,” it can be “renewed and perfected.” Nowadays, he suggested, it can metamorphize into secular pan-Arabism. “The past” (read, Islam) was grand, but not perfect and, anyway, it “cannot be returned to.” Aflaq called upon the Baath to “transcend” the past. However, in Islamic tradition, the Prophet is the perfect summit of human-kind for all epochs, the last of the prophets, and his prophecy is the word of God, so “transcending” God and the Prophet is sacrilege. So much for Aflaq’s “deep love for Islam.”

The most important Baath document, the Aflaq-sponsored 1947 founding party constitution, goes one step further: It does not mention Islam, God, or Prophet but warns against religion as political identity, demanding exclusive devotion to secular “Arab nationalism.” Party members must



Michel Aflaq (right) with Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, the regional secretary of the Iraqi Baath party, 1968. Aflaq insisted on “the secularism of the state” in which all religions would be equal and separated from the state.

“aspire to a future more glorious and exemplary than the Arabs had ever achieved.” This, too, is barely-disguised sacrilege. An inner-circle activist confessed that the Baathists were in fact atheists. Helfont does not report any of this. Thus, whether or not the early Baathists loved Islam as a proud historical memory, in the modern world, they also sought to replace it.

Provocative Secularism

A fourth problem is Helfont’s claim that, in 1968, the regime intended to impose many aspects of Islam but delayed. The Baath, he says, feared that imposing Islam would empower the Islamists. To disarm them, the regime performed a reluctant, decade-long “tactical retreat” into secularism. Helfont claims, “Clearly ... the regime’s internal documents” confirm this innovative theory. But Helfont fails to present any documents between 1968 and 1978 to that effect.

In reality, in a 1977 public lecture, Saddam, like Aflaq, paid homage to Islam as “the soul of the Arab nation.”

The Baath media praised Saddam for the return to Shari‘a.

admitted that the regime had an Islamic chink in its armor.

Helfont mentions this but ignores Saddam’s punchline. Drawing “lessons” from Islam, Saddam declared that the Baath has “a new theory,” part of which is that Islamic law is unsuitable for modern life. In practice, on the legal, educational, and cultural levels, Islam was substantially demoted, compared to the preceding Arif regime.

Helfont’s theory is topsy-turvy. The Islamists always demanded more Islam. By becoming more secular, the Baath only provoked them. Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Syria’s Assads clashed with their Islamists for that reason: These leaders refused to impose more Islam. Had the Baath in 1968-78 imposed more Islam or, at least retained the level of the Arifs, the Islamists would have likely left them alone, as had happened under the monarchy, the Baath of 1963, and the Arifs. Instead, under pressure from Vice President Saddam, the Baath kept to Aflaq’s true interpretation of Islam: secularism with limited concessions to religion.

Their secularism included calculated slaps to the Islamists such as promoting pagan Mesopotamia as a basis for the Iraqi national identity and encouraging a drinking culture. Rather than what Helfont sees as a panicky retreat into secularism, this was in fact a self-confident, triumphant charge into provocative secularism. The Islamists protested and were crushed. What changed everything was Khomeini’s 1979 ascendance. Without warning, a formidable Islamist, admired by most Iraqi Shiites, was on Saddam’s doorstep and accused him of atheism. A reluctant U-turn into Islam became necessary. In 1986, Saddam himself

The Islamic Faith Campaign

A fifth problem is Helfont’s interpretation of Saddam’s Islamic Faith Campaign. As early as Aflaq’s 1989 death, the party announced that he had secretly converted to Islam. A Christian founding father became an embarrassment. In January 1990, Saddam announced, “We [the Baath] are Hizb Allah” and promised to cancel any state law that contradicted the Shari‘a. This announcement disproves Helfont’s thesis that, until 2003, the Baath always rejected the “legal base” of Islam. He fails to report it. Helfont does admit, however, that Saddam Islamized the Iraqi national flag by affixing *Allahu Akbar* on it. The 1947 Baath constitution rejected religion as political identity, but Helfont insists that the new flag did not represent any ideological change.

Next, Saddam introduced a plethora of Shari‘a laws, including hand amputation for theft, closing pubs, and forbidding usury. Some, but not all of those laws mentioned Shari‘a explicitly, but the Baath media praised Saddam predominantly for this return to the Shari‘a. Helfont reports only some of this but insists that none of it was Shari‘a. Unlike Helfont, who observes from the outside, within the “Republic of Fear,” people understood the message: A great many Iraqi women hastily put on the hijab. In a closed-door meeting, Saddam himself defined the amputation as dictated by the Shari‘a. Helfont reports this but insists that because other reasons were mentioned first, this was not Shari‘a.

In another closed-door meeting, Saddam proudly defined his 1990s Faith Campaign as an Islamic “upheaval” (or revolution, *al-*

inqilab) in the lives of the Iraqis: Judges and merchants had to pass Shari‘a tests; six-year-olds had to study Qur’an, and so on. Saddam complained that the Islamic world did not notice it because he did not have to execute stubborn party members. Less enthusiastic about his father’s Islamization, Saddam’s son, Uday, reported that his comrades wondered whether Baghdad was becoming Riyadh.⁴ Helfont fails to report this.

Helfont’s thesis is that, between the 1940s and 2003, no meaningful ideological change in state-Islam relations took place. However, if until Khomeini’s ascendancy, both Aflaq and Saddam rejected Shari‘a and political Islam, but in the 1990s, as part of his “Faith Campaign,” Saddam imposed both, then Helfont’s thesis collapses. There was indeed an ideological change from secularism to political Islam, and this metamorphosis was difficult for some party old-timers, maybe even for Saddam, hence the many ambiguities and oscillations. It would seem that Helfont cannot admit that anything that Saddam imposed in the 1990s was Shari‘a or political Islam even when Saddam himself and his media proclaimed it. Such an admission would cast doubt on the author’s main thesis. The same reason may also explain Helfont’s omissions. No one is immune to overlooking documents. But in Helfont’s case, this happens too often, always in the same direction with evidence critical to his main thesis.

The sixth problem concerns a discussion of the connection between Saddam’s state-Islam policies and post-war insurgencies. This is apparently the result of a 2016 debate

As part of Saddam’s “Faith Campaign,” there was an ideological change from secularism to political Islam.

in *Foreign Affairs*⁵ regarding whether, albeit unwittingly, Saddam’s Islamic Faith Campaign prepared the ground for the Islamist insurgencies.

Helfont now admits that there is a connection, but since he included this link in the book’s title, readers might have expected him to add more about the insurgencies.

Conclusion

Helfont invested much in the book but did not allow his source materials to speak fully. His rigid insistence on Aflaq’s “deep love for Islam” and that no ideological change took place prevents him from addressing all the available material. One reason for this seems to be his dismissive approach to the open Baath media. When political Islam and Shari‘a appeared conspicuously in Saddam’s open media but less so in the internal records, Helfont tends to dismiss the media. But the open media had tremendous influence on Iraqis, and it is essential for contextualizing the internal records. While his approach to the internal records is unjustifiably admiring and uncritical, he still turns a blind eye to key internal documents.

Helfont thus misses the difficulty of the party departing in the 1990s from secular pan-Arabism, its most cherished article of faith, and replacing it with the leader’s Arab-hegemonic Islamism. This difficulty explains why there is less Shari‘a and political Islam in the internal records than in the public media. However, during the 1990s, Baath members were fully exposed to the new Islamism in the party’s open publications,

⁴ *Babil* (Baghdad), July 19, 1994.

⁵ Jan. 12, Apr. 8, 20, June 5, 2016.

radio, and television and found Shari‘a galore. Furthermore, they experienced real-life changes as the bars in Abu Nuwas Street shut down; their children told them of Islamization at school, and people lost their hands for economic crimes.

Helfont is deaf to the muted opposition to the Islamization inside the party, both in the press and in the archives. He, therefore, misinterprets the hesitations, oscillations, deceptions, contradictions, and equivocations; nor does he recognize Saddam’s tactical retreats or his eventual steely resolve to Islamize party and state in order to secure regime survival. Saddam’s shift included deviating from Baath doctrine and practice and even the willingness to execute stubborn party veterans, which he never needed to

resort to. Fear, the result of past experience, combined with rewards, rendered the latter unnecessary.

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