

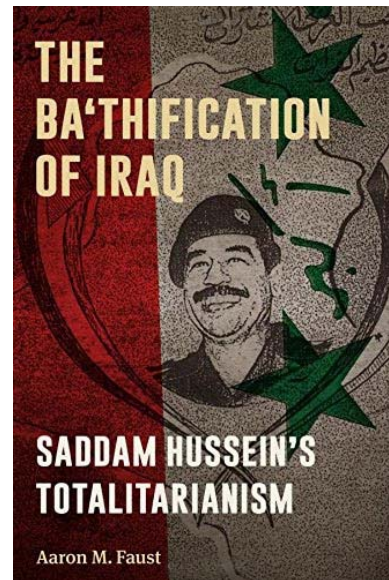
# Saddam's Baathist Ruse

By Amatzia Baram

**The Ba'thification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Totalitarianism.** By Aaron M. Faust. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. 296 pp. \$55.

When Baghdad fell to U.S. and allied forces in April 2003, a treasure trove of Iraqi Baath documents fell into coalition hands. Renamed the Baath Regional Command Center (BRCC) archive by its stewards, the Iraq Memory Foundation, it represents the most complete record currently available of the process of intimidation and indoctrination to which Iraqi society as well as the party members were subjected by the Baathist leadership. Faust's book is an excellent analysis of the material he studied, which is archived at the Hoover Institution on Stanford University's campus in Palo Alto. This archive holds some thirteen million pages of documents—eleven million of which are in Arabic. This gargantuan quantity means that one needs many lifetimes to review all the relevant documents. What Faust has uncovered, however, provides us with much food for thought.

Faust observes that when a reader opens a BRCC file, he steps “into a self-contained universe where ‘normal’ common sense does not apply; an environment governed by its own language, rituals, logic and ethics.” Unlike some other young researchers, Faust was well-versed on Baathist Iraq before he began working with the archival material as evidenced from the way he places his study results in the context of Iraqi history studies. Rather than drowning in a flood of often-deliberately deceptive documents, he has read the archive



documents critically and is knowledgeable about real life in Baathist Iraq. He recognizes that if the documents fail to mention some regime action, this does not mean that it did not happen. Likewise, he understands that even if the internal documents repeat the same claim hundreds of times—for example, that the regime remained against Islamism to the very end, this is no proof that the claim is true. Rather, what it proves is that the regime desperately wanted party members to believe the claim.

The files present a highly-controlled and imaginary world, designed to convince comrades that the party was always true to its secular founding vision and had not changed course over time. The reality though was quite the opposite. Faust understands that at least from 1990, Saddam's Baathism (what the author calls “Husseini Baathism”) was substantially different from the party and

ideology of its founding father Michel Aflaq (1910-89) and his generation. At the same time, Faust notes that even when Saddam deviated from the party line, he needed to retain some of Aflaq's ideological structure in order to provide his regime with basic legitimacy. Thus, in its internal discourse, the party continued to preach the old ideas while lowering the profile of its new tribal and Islamist policies.

In fact, these new Islamist policies essentially emptied the Baath "faith" of much of its early content. Faust demonstrates the "discontinuity between the Ba'athisms of [Ahmed Hassan] Al-Bakr and Aflaq and the Ba'athism of Saddam Hussein." He argues convincingly that Saddam defined his Baath as a "new stage" of the movement, one which necessitated new political directions for the good of the nation and, above all, for that of Saddam and his henchmen at the helm. In this circular reasoning, the survival of the regime became indispensable because only through this path could the great vision of the party, Arab unity, be achieved.

However, by the end of the 1990s, it had become impossible to tell what Baathism stood for. All the violence, economic disasters, wars, and suppressions were justified by the hope of achieving secular, pan-Arab unity, a vision not even remotely achieved. Saddam rejected unity between equals with Syria when it seemed possible in 1978-79. By 1980, his watered-down Baathist interpretation of socialism, to be financed by huge oil revenues, had failed completely, leaving in its wake a barely-functioning welfare state. The vision of an Iraqi-centered, hegemonic, pan-Arabism never materialized. The only "Arab unity" he created was through the forcible annexation of Kuwait.

Faust should have been more careful,

**Saddam's regime failed at its two central goals: pan-Arabism and secularism.**

however, in some of his statements. For instance, he contradicts himself on the success of the regime's efforts to mobilize and reeducate society in its

image. He states that Iraq's rulers failed at their primary objective "to convert Iraqis from their traditional faiths and normative belief systems into genuine Ba'athists." This is most certainly correct, but elsewhere he writes that "the BRCC documents show that by 2003, Ba'athification had destroyed or emasculated most of the Iraqi pre-1968 governmental, civil, social, and familial institutions and value systems and had transformed or replaced them with Hussein Ba'athist versions." This may be true about most (though not all) state institutions, but with social mores, identities, and primordial affiliations, the regime failed miserably.

The regime failed at its two central goals: pan-Arabism and secularism. By legitimizing the tribes and their sheikhs, Saddam jettisoned the party's ideal of creating a seamless, national Arab society. It is true that after he recruited the tribes, Saddam used them to support his regime in a difficult era. However, he paid dearly for that cooperation. The tribes became much stronger than under the previous regimes. Both Sunni and Shiite sheikhs acquired wealth and total power over their people coupled with a very high profile ideological surrender of the regime to tribalism. Rather than disappearing, many social identities were, in fact, enhanced.

The larger sectarian and ethnic identities of Shiite Arabs and Sunni Kurds also received a boost, mainly in reaction to Saddam's coercive policies. Faust seems to believe, for example, that collaboration of some Kurdish tribes with the regime against their Kurdish brethren demonstrates the weakening of traditional identities. However, the Kurdish Bardost tribe, for one, fought

against Barzani's Kurds as a result of an old tribal feud, not out of love for Saddam or acquiescence in Baathism. Saddam turned a primordial identity—tribalism—against a newer one—Kurdish ethnic nationalism. When it comes to the Shiites, the party lured many into its ranks with favors, but the vast majority remained estranged. Following the bloody suppression of the 1991 revolt, most Shiites lived in fear and bitterness. Most of all, Saddam's turn to Islam in the 1990s implied that Iraq's Muslim identity had defeated Baathist secularism. And yet, as seen in the Hoover archive, within the insulated bubble of party indoctrination, almost everything remained as before: There was little mention of the Shari'a, and there was no Shiite-Sunni problem.

Faust is not telling us anything new when he recounts the totalitarian techniques

by which the Baath tried to shape society in their image, including culturalization, enticement, and terror. And yet, he does create a detailed world out of seemingly banal documents that, when put together and analyzed properly, reconstruct the Baathist system and mentality. As such, his is a magisterial study of Planet Baath: critical, sensitive, and sensible. By combining archival material with a deep awareness of Iraqi history, Faust succeeds in creating a complete and convincing whole.

**Amatzia Baram** is professor emeritus at the department of Middle East history and founder and director of the Center for Iraq Studies at the University of Haifa.

