



Compulsion in Religion: Saddam Hussein, Islam, and the Roots of Insurgencies in Iraq by Samuel Helfont.

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Conventional wisdom has it that Saddam Hussein was essentially a secular dictator who projected the public image of a devout Sunni Muslim while facing challenges by religious leaders of Iraq's Shi'a majority. *Compulsion in Religion* argues, to the contrary, that Saddam employed a peculiar interpretation of Islam to control or suppress most religious groups in the country. His efforts to use Islam as intellectual support for anti-foreign Arab nationalism fueled the insurgencies that so plagued his country after he was deposed.

Military historian Samuel Helfont (Naval War College) served as a signals intelligence collector against Saddam's regime. This background has enabled him to use not only published sources but also the surviving records of the Ba'ath Party, Saddam's primary instrument for population control.

Helfont argues persuasively that the official Ba'ath position avoided condemning the Shi'a religion per se, instead objecting to the sect's susceptibility to supposed un-Arab, "Persian" influences. While individual party members expressed strong sectarian bias, one of the founders of the Ba'ath movement, Michel Aflaq, had downplayed internal divisions while insisting that Islam was an essential part of Arab culture and history. In effect, Saddam's regime tried to impose the religious equivalent of Modern Standard Arabic, espousing a homogenized form of Islam that downplayed or ignored variations in the religion in order to use Islam for a sophisticated modernizing purpose.

The regime followed parallel axes of effort to impose this version of religion on the Iraqi populace. Its preferred method was persuasive co-optation, controlling everything from religious education to sermon topics to construction permits for mosques. While it never completely trusted the clerics, it tolerated them so long as they hewed to the party line. When co-optation failed, Saddam resorted to traditional secret police tactics, including the use of informers and, when necessary, arrests and executions. By the early 1990s, Helfont argues, the regime had assembled a body of Sunni and Shi'ite religious leaders who publicly and sometimes privately supported the government. True opponents of the regime were censored, exiled, or executed so they could not influence public opinion.

In the 1990s, this level of control enabled the Iraqi government to step back and permit religious leaders to act in a manner that appeared to foreign observers as independent of and even hostile to Saddam:

Instead of destroying social institutions, the Ba'athists infiltrated them, and then transformed them into an instrument of their regime's authoritarian system.... As this phenomenon increased throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, it created the illusion that the regime had lost control. In the end, some scholars supported the regime openly and some did so secretly, but almost everyone was compromised. Those who rebuffed the regime generally did not survive or were forced into exile.

American policymakers and strategists clearly missed this fact as they planned to invade Iraq in 2003. (210)

In the run-up to the 2003 war, most Iraqi clerics followed the party line by condemning American aggression and imperialism. Helfont contends that Western leaders greatly underestimated not only Saddam's religious control of his country but also the politicization of Shi'a leaders who, once the Ba'ath regime was overthrown, began to pressure foreign occupiers to leave so they could create their own state. Regime change also freed true extremists like Muqtada al-Sadr from government control, permitting them to emerge as radical leaders.

The author is on more familiar ground when he describes the response to regime change by Ba'athist officials and officers, many of whom had Sunni backgrounds. While Saddam was in power, such people were discouraged from expressing sectarian prejudices. Once they were unemployed, however, they saw the United States turning the government over to the apparently traitorous Shi'a majority, prompting a rapid hardening of sectarian hatred. The only logical course for these embittered ex-Ba'athists was to join the Islamic State.

Helfont makes his case in a clear, compelling argument that sometimes omits various factors of which he is undoubtedly aware. For example, he appears to attribute American ignorance about internal Iraqi matters almost entirely to Saddam's success in social control. But other factors that contributed to American misunderstanding included the deliberate lies told by Iraqi exiles seeking US backing to place them in power. Moreover, the political leaders in the George W. Bush administration so despised Saddam's regime that they assumed the Iraqi people would welcome foreign invaders bringing a different conception of government. The Germans made the same mistake when they invaded the Soviet Union in 1941.

Such other factors would go beyond Helfont's chosen topic—the methodology and consequences of Ba'athist control of religion in Iraq. Within that subject area, Samuel Helfont has convincingly clarified a number of key factors that eluded most Americans two decades ago. That alone makes *Compulsion in Religion* essential reading for anyone wishing to understand recent Iraqi and American history.