Islam and the Left in Iraq

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The division of Islam in Iraq into the Sunni and the Shi'I strands is a crucial factor in politics and society, and especially pertinent to attitudes to the Left.

Sunni Islam, from Ottoman times was the official religion of the state and its institutions. As such, mainstream Sunnism has typically been loyalist to successive regimes dominated by Sunni rulers. Dissident Sunni Islam, typically of the Muslim Brotherhood, had a weak presence in the country, mainly in Mosul. Reformist Islam of the late nineteenth century onwards, associated with Al-Afghani and Abduh in Egypt, had some influence among intellectuals, but remained marginal.

Shi'I Islam excluded from government, enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. The shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, and the Baghdad suburb of Kadhem were governed by the high Mujtahids and their networks, including families of notables. Those played a crucial part in the politics of Iraq from Ottoman times and into the twentieth century, often as a source of criticism and opposition. Popular manifestations of opposition, demonstrations and riots were also more likely to emanate from those quarters. The Shi'I religious establishment also maintained intimate connections with the tribal leaders of the South, and were sometimes involved in tribal insurrections, especially in the 1930s. Shi'ism, then, as community and institutions, was a crucial motor of Iraqi politics throughout the twentieth century.

The Left

The Left in Iraq was primarily the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) which at its zenith from the 1940s to the 70s was the main party to penetrate different strata of Iraqi society on the bases of ideology rather than communalism and patronage so typical of the politics of the region. Also counted on the Left was the Ahali Group, dovetailing into the National Democratic Party (NDP), a party of liberal notables and modern bourgeoisie headed by patrician figures, primarily Kamil al-Chaderchi.

The ICP was founded in 1933, bringing together various strands of Leftist activism, mostly in the south of the country around Basra and Nasiriyya, Shi'ite heartlands. Earlier Leftist/Bolshevik formations functioned there and in Baghdad, with an input in Basra from Soviet personnel in Iran.[1] There were contradictory strands in the pronouncements on religion from those quarters. The Iraqi Marxist circles in the 1920s and 30s, such as the group around Hussain al-Rahhal, were militantly anti-religion, casting it in the role of 'opiate of the masses'.[2] On the other side, declarations from the

Soviets were addressed to the Muslims of the Middle East and India, as colonial subjects urged to rise against their oppressors in the name of their religious identity. Soviet agents in Iran then proceeded to attempt (eventually unsuccessful) to found a 'Union of Ulama' in Qum and then in the Iraqi holy cities. Sons of some of the leading Mujtahids, notably Muhammad al-Sadr and Muhammad al-Khalisi were attracted to Bolshevism, not so much as an ideology as an aid in the struggle against the British.[3] The Mujtahids eventually distanced themselves from any such entanglement.

A more mature ICP later decided not to tackle religion, but to avoid the issue. In a declaration in the party paper, *Kifah-ush-Sha'b* in 1935 comrades were forbidden to discuss religion with the people who have 'not yet attained the perspective that would make a forthright discussion of such a matter feasible'.[4] This remained the policy of the ICP. Indeed, given their bases of support in the Shi'ite regions (more to follow), the communists looked for ways of combining their activism and mobilization with Shi'I rituals, particularly those of 'Ashura and the Arba'in, both mourning the martyrdom of Hussain.[5] Many radical movements, from the communists to Iranian Islamic revolutionaries, have attempted to identify the martyrdom of Hussain with their cause.[6]

The Islamic Response to the Left

Sunni Islam, mostly loyalist, rejected communism and the Left as godless innovations with economic programmes contrary to the Shari'a. The Muslim Brotherhood and Hizbul Tahrir, the two oppositional Sunni political organizations, saw the Left as their main rival and antagonist, but were mostly marginal to Iraqi politics. Shi'ite ulama and authorities were equally hostile to communism. Yet communism was much more intimately entangled in the Shi'ite milieu at a number of levels. The Shi'I cities and regions, as well as their Baghdad neighbourhoods, became important constituencies for the ICP, especially at its most active periods of the 1950s and 60s. The communists played on Shi'ite symbols and ceremonies of martyrdom identifying popular struggles with the Shi'ite saints. When some Shi'ite clerics, notably Baqer al-Sadr, ventured into modern economics and philosophy, they implicitly presented a rival discourse to that of the communists, while at the same time incorporating many themes of Marxist theory into their Islamic vocabularies. Equally, the modern Shi'ite political parties, primarily al-Da'wa, adopted communist models of organization and mobilization. Let us consider those aspects in more detail.

Shi'ite Areas as Communist Constituencies

For much of the history of the ICP, Shi'ites and Kurds were heavily represented in its membership. Leadership was more balanced with Sunnis, whose predominance in the higher echelons of society was reflected in the ICP.[7] Various explanations have been offered.

The eminent scholar of Iraqi history, the late Hanna Batatu[8] explains the phenomenon partly in terms of class antagonism, in which many of the Shi'I areas, notably in Najaf, manifested extremes of wealth and poverty. Poor Shi'I districts of Baghdad, such as Aqd al-Akrad (Shi'ite Fayli Kurds) were also important strongholds.[9] But that doesn't explain why so many of the communist cadres and leaders in Najaf and elsewhere in the 1950s were the sons of notables and ulama. Batatu[10] noted that many of the leading communists were sons of religious leaders, Shi'I, Sunni and Kurdish. He explains this in terms of the downward movement in wealth, status and influence of the religious classes, leading to a sense of decline and the search for new avenues of progress, supplied by a revolutionary and non-sectarian party. He drew an analogy to the attraction to revolutionary creeds of the sons of the lower clergy in Russia[11]

The scholar Hassan 'Alawi argued that Najaf and the Shi'I milieu generally were especially receptive to enlightenment ideas, and distinguished two such strands: Islamic reformism and Marxism, which he considered to be parallel endeavours for renewal. Islamic reformism, he noted, had little influence on Sunni religious thinkers, but were taken up enthusiastically in Shi'I quarters, among similar groups to those who embraced Marxism.[12]
'Alawi's observations can be widened to say that the Shi'a were generally more susceptible to ideological and radical politics, and communism during the decades of 1940s to 60s was the most welcoming. Shi'I cadres and leaders also featured in the Arab nationalist parties, such as the Independence Party. But they were marginalized in relation to the mainly Sunni Arab character of that party. The Ba'th Party in the 1950s seemed to offer a more progressive agenda with revolutionary and even Marxist themes. It constituted, in a sense, part of the Left. Indeed many of the early founders and leaders of that party were Shi'ite.[13] In the course of the evolution of the Ba'th after their successful coup in 1953, the Shi'ite were gradually removed from leading positions in favour of Sunni cliques based on region, tribe and kinship. The ICP, then, was one of the few (perhaps with the National Democratic Party) which was Iraqist and non-sectarian, which offered the Shi'I intelligentsia an avenue for activism and influence. This is the explanation favoured by Nakash.[14] It also explains the success of Shi'ite radical parties, mainly al-Da'wa, in the later 1960s, attracting similar social groups, after the decline of communism and the sunnification of Ba'thism.

Islam and the Left after the 1958 Revolution

The 1958 military coup developed into a political and social revolution with far reaching consequences. Aspects that are particularly pertinent to this discussion were: land-reform (Agrarian Reform Law 1958)[15], which displaced an important layer of the old ruling class with implications

for the revenues and powers of the religious institutions, especially the Shi'I. Equally pertinent were reforms of the family laws Personal Status Law of 1959), enhancing women's rights, restricting polygamy and unilateral divorce, and, crucially, equalizing the shares of inheritance between male and female beneficiaries, all seen to be contrary to the explicit texts of the Quran and the traditions of the Shari'a, for both Sunnis and Shi'is.[16]

The Qasim regime (1958-63), though not institutionally 'democratic', nevertheless allowed an unprecedented level of political freedom, with sporadic repression and some episodes of great violence. The ICP was the greatest beneficiary of this situation, and for a time Qasim depended on it for support against his Arab nationalist and Islamic opponents. Communism, then, was seen by conservative strata, Arab nationalists and religious quarters to be the root of all evil and a threat to religion and tradition. Those groups, otherwise heterogeneous and antagonistic, came to unite against the common threat.[17]

The perceived threat from the communists was exacerbated by the fact that many of the educated young men of Shi'I families, including those of the 'ulama, were attracted to communism, as were many of the poor Shi'a of the cities and peasants buoyed by land distribution. Shi'I Mujtahids were alarmed by the decline of *khums* (religious tax) revenues from now dispossessed landlords and the increasing indifference of others. The numbers of students coming to the *hawza* (schools) of Najaf, and the number of pilgrims to the shrines were declining.[18] One response by the senior mujtahids was to issue fatwas against the communists. Ayatullah Muhsin al-Hakim, the most senior declared:

> Any connection with the Communist Party is unlawful. Such a connection is in the nature of disbelief and infidelity.[19]

At the same time, the perceived threat of communism led many of the religious Shi'a to embark on modern political organization of associations and parties. The Da'wa Party was the main result of this activity.

Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was the main theoretician of this attempt at modernity. Facing the challenge of modern political ideologies, Marxism being the most important at that time, al-Sadr set out to formulate Islamic answers to the questions addressed by these ideologies. Sadr's major work was '*Iqtisaduna*, our (Muslim) economics, published in 1961.[20] This long book is divided into three parts: critique of Marxism, critique of capitalism and Islamic economics. He drew on the Marxist critique of capitalism, and the liberal critique of Marxism, but both fail because they are not orientated to God and the next life. Sadr then proceeded to formulating Islamic economics with hybrid concepts of modern economic categories married to traditional *fiqh* concepts. His theory of property, for

instance, drew on the labour theory of value, but qualified in terms of *fiqh* categories. Ultimately, the formulations are ethical, recognizing private property, but limited by public interest and social justice, much like social democratic welfare statism. In this respect, the Marxist Left acted as a challenge as well as a model for the formulation of modern Islamic ideas.

Communism also provided Shi'I politics with a model of organization and mobilization, especially under Ba'thist repression from 1968.[21] Like many other clandestine Left and Islamic parties in the Arab world, the Da'wa adopted the Leninist model based on cells, chains of command and party discipline.

Islam and the Left after the Qasim period

The Qasim period, as we saw, provided causes that united the conservative and religious classes, Sunni and Shi'I, as well as Arab nationalists and Ba'thist against the Communist threat and its immense popularity. The 1963 Ba'thist coup which overthrew Qasim (against bitter resistance from many regions and popular neighbourhoods in Baghdad)[22] was, in turn overturned by Abdul-Salam `Aref, conservative and Islamic officer with strong anti-Shi'ite sectarian sentiments. Shi'I and Sunni ulama, however, were gratified by `Aref's readiness to repeal the family law reforms of 1959 and restore Shari'a provisions. `Aref, however, restored the Sunni predominance in government, the military and the economic sphere.[23] The 1963 coup was inaugurated with a massacre of communists and of the pro-Qasim popular forces, as the Ba'thists had weak popular constituencies. Many of the victims were Shi'a. The main centres of resistance to the Ba'thists were Shi'ite suburbs and neighbourhoods of Baghdad, which were also centres of ICP and Qasim support: Madinat al-Thawra (later Saddam city, and now Sadr city), the shrine district of Kadhemiyya and Aqd al-Akrad (Kurdish quarter of Shi'ite Kurds), and the Port of Basra.[24] Batatu argued that the bases of the resistance were class sentiments rather than religious sect: those areas were amongst the poorest.

The increasingly sectarian policies of the `Aref government was perpetuated by the Ba'thist regime which replaced it from the 1968 coup, eventually bringing Saddam to power. The Ba'th Party itself had a preponderance of Shi'ites in its leadership in 1963, only for those leaders to be progressively distanced and eliminated to make for a sectarian Sunni leadership with a military preponderance in 1968.[25]

The Ba'th regime installed in 1968 soon developed a Leftist appearance. Its rhetoric was borrowed from the communist repertoire of championing workers and peasants. It installed a 'socialist' statist economy on the Soviet and Nasirist models. In foreign policy and arms imports it became close to the

Soviet camp. President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr made overtures to the communists, offering them ministerial posts in 1968, which they initially refused, provoking a wave of violent persecution against them. The Ba'th regime finally succeeded in drawing the communists into participating in government under a National Patriotic Front in 1972.[26] This was ultimately to end in the exposure of the secret organization of the ICP and its demise in 1979. For much of the 1970s, the Ba'th regime, incorporating the ICP in government, could be counted on the Left. Part of its stance was a strong secularist direction in all spheres of government, society and culture, including family law reforms which fell just short of the 1959 legislation. This was partly in conformity with the long held ideology of secularism on the Left, but it crucially represented an attack on the religious establishment, especially the Shi'ite establishment and political forces. The Ba'th was driving towards inclusive control of all social bases of organisation and action, and the Shi'ite *marja'iya* (religious leadership) and its institutions enjoyed a high level of autonomy. They closed down religious schools, expelled foreign students, confiscated religious revenues, and banned ritual processions.[27] The government responded to Shi'ite demonstrations and protests with further anti-religious measures, banning the reading of the Quran on the radio and ending religious instruction in schools.[28] These campaigns against autonomous religious institutions and their revenues was to become a regular feature of the Ba'th in the 1970s, to be intensified after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and the ensuing war with Iran. Shi'ite discontent and political activism were disengaged from the Left, especially with the decimation of the ICP from 1978, and the Iranian Revolution the following year, which offered a model of Islamic revolution.

Notes

[1] Batatu 404-38

[2] Batatu 391-4

[3] Batatu 1141-7

[4] Quoted in Batatu 409

[5] Nakash 161

[6] Batatu 695-8

[7] Batatu 697-705

[8] Batatu 752-7

[9] Batatu 982-3

[10] Batatu 1000

[11] Ibid

[12] 'Alawi 280

[13] 'Alawi 223-8; Batatu 968

[14] Nakash132-6

[15] Batatu 836-8

[16] Nakash 135; Jabar 76-7

[17] ‘Alawi 200-8; Jabar 123-7

[18] Jabar 75-7

[19] Quoted in Jabar 124

[20] Mallat, 111-89; Jabar 296-307

[21] Jabar 78-9

[22] Batatu 974-85

[23] ‘Alawi 210-31

[24] Batatu 982-3

[25] Alawi 224-8

[26] Tripp 196-7

[27] Tripp 202-4

[28] Tripp 202-3

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