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Najaf ‘ulama and Secular movements in Iraq between 1950 and 1963

Introduction

Between the mid 1920s and 1950s Iraq witnessed two insuperable phenomena; the unusual decline in the role of religion among the Iraqi people, notably the Shi‘i community, and the increasing popularity of secular movements. It is true that in the same period this phenomenon was observed in many parts of the world but the Shi‘i community of Iraq represents a unique case study.

This paper aims to address three main questions. First: why the majority of Shi‘i people in Iraq shifted their loyalties from their traditional religious institution (marja‘yya), which represented for a long time the centre of power of the Shi‘i community, towards new political formations? Second: what explains the appeal of secular movements to Shi‘i people and what determined their political inclination towards Arab nationalism or communism? Third: how Shi‘i ‘ulama responded to this challenge and how they attempted to strengthen their relationship with their followers?

My argument here links the weakening of Shi‘ism to the uncommon surge of communism within the Shi‘i community during the first half of the 20th century. I also suggest that communism has been more successful, pro rata, within Shi‘i regions compared with the Sunni areas in Iraq. Although most ethnic groups in Iraq welcomed communism, its success among the Shi‘a has been exceptional.
Comunism and Nationalism

Communism, in effect, has provided Shi'i politicised individuals with a new sense of religio-political attachment after the failure of Shi'i 'ulama in converting the political system in Iraq. By stressing political, economic and social aspects, the communist movement in Iraq has come forth as the most capable device to address the real needs of the people. Furthermore, the Shi'a have reconciled and interpreted Communist ideas according to their basic doctrines. Both Communism and Shi'ism put emphasis on justice, equality and the oppression of the masses at the hands of the elite. The earthly dream of re-distribution of wealth among people in both Communism and Shi'ism represents a unique feature. Similar to Communism, which makes a promise to bring hope for oppressed people to govern the world again after disappearance of all classes, Shi'ism too gives similar hope with the return of al-Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam.

On the other hand, nationalist ideas were first advocated by the Shi'i 'ulama in Najaf as an expression of their spontaneous and non-organised sentiments along with the primitive tendency of Arab nationalism in the Fertile Crescent. This short phase occupied the period between the beginning of the 20th century and 1920. This period was interrupted however by the imposition of the Sharifian Sunni elite in power and characterised by its clear pan-Arab tendency. The second stage (between 1921 and 1941) witnessed a secular and anti-Shi'i sentiment, theoretically set out by Sati' al-Husri and put in effect by the governing Sunni elite. Starting from the mid 1940s until 1963, however, a third stage could be distinguished with a rising Shi'i element among the Arab nationalists. During this period, Arab nationalism became imbued with an Islamic thread, and this attracted more Shi'i followers. This stage, however, came to its end in 1963 with 'Abdul Salam 'Arif's presidency and continued until the toppling of Saddam's regime in 2003.

Education

The education system in Iraq has been the main instrument that fortified the position of Arab nationalism that favoured the Sunnis. This was mainly due to the fact that the man in charge of education policy was Sati' al-Husri, an ex-Ottoman official who converted from Ottomanism to pan-Arabism.

Appointed in 1921 as a Director of Education, Al-Husri attracted Arab teachers from the Fertile Crescent to teach in Iraqi schools. Al-Husri primarily stressed on the importance of teaching Arab history to propagate Arab nationalist consciousness. History, for Al-Husri, comes second only after language as a principal element that must be used to reinforce Arab nationalism in Iraqi society.

Al-Husri's replacement in the mid 1920s by Muhammad Fadhil Al-Jamali, a liberal Shi'i nationalist educated in the West, opened a new window of opportunity for the Shi'a youth. During this period and especially between 1933-1934 when he was appointed as a Minister of Education, Al-Jamali introduced new measures that balanced the education system in Iraq. To this end, he
supported establishing a new secondary school in Najaf, staffed with teachers from Syria and Palestine, formed new directors of education in the Shi’i provinces and selected some Shi’a students to study abroad. Al- Jamalî was a solid believer in pan-Arabism and continued al-Husî’s nationalist project in the education system but this time with bias towards the Shia. For this reason, Al-Jamalî was criticised by the Sunnis for adopting what has been termed ‘Shi’i policy’ in the education system of Iraq.

**Arabism and Islam**

*Nadi al-Muthana* (Al-Muthana Club) became a forum for nationalists in Iraq and many of its original members, such as Muhammad Mahdi Kuba, later joined the Istiqlal Party (Independence), which was founded in 1946. The Istiqlal Party was particularly popular in Najaf and members from prominent families, such as Ahmad Al-Haboobi, a lawyer, and Ahmad Al-Jazari, a junior religious sheikh and a son of the senior religious cleric Abdul Kareem Al-Jazari, worked hard to recruit more members.

In addition to the support from prominent Shia families, nationalism in Iraq was given a special boost from the relationship between Islam and Arabism. Nationalist ideology in Iraq had mainly been shaped during the previous two decades by the secular ideas of Sati Al-Husri. Although Al-Husri emphasised the importance of religion, his nationalist ideology remained almost secular. Al-Husri gave more weight to language and history at the expense of religion. The new formula, however, made a close and special link between Islam and Arabism after a long period of pure secular Arabism.

Thus, Arabism was transformed from being a hostile doctrine to the Shi’a people into one that was compatible with their beliefs. Some advocates of Arab nationalism even went as far as to claim that Imam ‘Ali was the pioneer of Arab nationalism, who based its principles on justice, liberty and in accordance with the genuine Arab traditions.

Surprisingly enough, the first Ba’th branch officially founded in Iraq was in the city of Karbala in 1948. The office was set up by Sa’doon Hamadi, a Shi’i from Karbala. The Ba’th founded branches in Baghdad appealing to the university students and also in Nassirayya (the south) where Fouad Al-Rikabi made use of his personal skills and networks to expand Ba’th membership. Al-Rikabi was chosen as the first secretary of the Ba’th in Iraq in 1950. During this period, the Shi’i members comprised the majority within the upper echelons of the Ba’th. Of the 9 members in the Ba’th Command, there were 6 Shi’i members and only 3 Sunnis.

**Najaf: Between Communism and Ba’thists**

In Najaf, more than any other place, the Ba’thists utilised their social patronage as most Ba’thists came from distinguished Arab families like Al al-Sharqi and Al al-Shaikh Radhi. Furthermore, many of them belong to *sadah* families (descendants of the Prophet Mohammed) like Al al-Safi, Al al-Rifa’ei, Abu
Tabeekh and many others. Patronage networks not only provided them with support and safety but also with moral and political encouragement. Najafi Ba’thi members and their sympathisers used nationalism as an ethnic weapon against their communist rival. Ba’thists in general, and in Najaf in particular, accused communists of being non-Arab.

Consequently, the attachment of Shi’i ‘ulama to nationalist issues undoubtedly rendered them closer to Ba’thists at the expense of communists. Shi’i ‘ulama were in general under the influence of Nasser’s nationalist current and good recipients of his ideas. The majority of Shi’i ‘ulama in Iraq and Iran showed undisputable support to Nasser and opposed their national governments. Al-Hakeem, in particular, expressed his solid support to Nasser during the Tripartite Aggression in 1956. Nasser's relation with the Shi’i ‘ulama may be traced back to this moment as Nasser recognised the importance of Shi’a support. Nasser gave this factor more attention after the intensity of his confrontation with Qasim and his communists’ allies.

However, the most important chapter was the role of Al-Hakeem in confronting the ICP and hence in paving the way for the Ba’th. Al-Hakeem issued his famous fatwa against the ICP in 12 February 1960 and the fatwa read like this: ‘Any connection with the Communist Party is unlawful. Such a connection is in the nature of disbelief and infidelity, or it is supportive of disbelief and infidelity’. The importance of this fatwa is that it contributed in bringing down the ICP and Qasim’s regime. Without the effective religious campaign that undermined the public support for communists, the Ba’th party could not take over in 1963. Najaf therefore might be considered as the gate, through which the first nationalist government of the Ba’th and Abdul Salam ‘Arif came to Baghdad.