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## Historiography of Ba`thi Iraq Post-2003: Faust's Ba`thification in Comparative Perspective

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## **Book review**

*The Ba`thification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein’s Totalitarianism*, Aaron M. Faust (2015), Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 296 pp., ISBN: 9781477305577, h/bk, \$55.00

*Reviewed by Karen Pfeifer, Smith College*

## **Historiography of Ba`thi Iraq post-2003: Faust’s *Ba`thification in comparative perspective***

Faust’s *Ba`thification of Iraq* is a useful addition to the post-2003 surge of literature specifically on the 1968–2003 period of Ba`thist rule in republican Iraq, and even more specifically on the reign of Saddam Hussein. The work’s strengths reside, first, in the carefully organized and explicit detail – 192 pages of text, plus ten pages of appendices and 52 pages of endnotes – with which that 35-year period and the nature of Saddam’s role are described, and, second, in the privileged access the author was granted to a large but specific cache of documents from the Ba`th party’s own archives. The study’s limitations reflect the narrowness of its focus, with rare reference to historical context (19–20, endnote 7) or to specific knowledge of Iraqi society and

political history or to the author's experience with the Iraqi people. The volume is best read as a companion to other works on the history and politics of Iraq and of the Arab World that provide context and a more nuanced interpretation of Ba`thist rule, including consideration of whether Saddam's reign was a fully 'totalitarian' or an extremely brutal but constrained 'authoritarian' dictatorship, and what the interactive impact has been in Iraq since 2003 between the Ba`thist legacy and the US-led invasion, occupation and subsequent interventions.

Faust indicates in the Preface and Acknowledgments that the book is based on his Ph.D. dissertation at Boston University. To prepare himself, he studied Arabic in Damascus on a Fulbright fellowship and a Boren fellowship from the National Security Education Program.<sup>1</sup> Faust's research entailed investigation of a set of documents from the 'Ba`th Arab Socialist Party Regional Command Collection' (BRCC) that had been discovered in Baghdad in 2003 by anti-Ba`th dissident author and Brandeis Professor Kanan Makiya.<sup>2</sup> The documents were combed and catalogued *in situ* by representatives of the Iraq Memory Foundation, headed by Professor Makiya, and were then transported by the US government to the United States 'for scanning and safekeeping' (xv), a move that was protested by Iraqi, Canadian and American archivists as a violation of international conventions (endnote 1). Faust was allowed to view the documents first at Makiya's home ( xxiii), before they were transferred, 'in order to preserve them and make them accessible to scholars until conditions in Iraq allow for their safe return' ( xv), to the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University, where Faust did the bulk of his research. As of the date of publication, 2015, Faust was serving as a Foreign Affairs Officer at the US Department of State, a position commensurate with his Boren fellowship, his archival access and the analysis presented in his book. While Faust's analysis generally agrees with the point of view of Professor Makiya, whom Faust cites at greater length than any other secondary source (6-7,

16, 151) regarding Saddam's use of terror to cow his subordinates and the general public as well as real or potential enemies, Faust argues further that Saddam's reign went beyond terror to encompass every dimension of Iraqi society in a totalitarian system.

Faust cites most of the established and well-respected literature on Iraqi political history in the preface to the book (xvii–xviii). The works mentioned in the preface and listed in the bibliography include many papers, but not books, by Amatzia Baram through 2002 and Ofra Bengio from 1981 to 2000 (mostly in *Middle East Contemporary Record*), Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett (2001 book and some papers), Isam Al-Khafaji (papers through 2003 but not his 2004 book), Faleh A. Jabar (2003 book and several articles), Charles Tripp (2007), Joseph Sassoon (2012) and Dina Riza' Khoury (2013).<sup>3</sup> However, Faust does not engage with this literature in a concentrated or critical way, although much of it provides the depth and context that his study lacks. Rather, he refers to each of those sources briefly at some particular points in the body of his study to buttress his argument. For example, Faust cites Jabar to confirm Saddam's cynical use of tribalism early on to consolidate his rule (143), but does not address Jabar's analysis of the complexities or interactive effects that this evolving 'tribalism' had on the regime (Jabar 2000).

Faust cites Khoury's work (2013) in the preface, along with Sassoon (2012), as examples of other research pursued in the archives retrieved after the 2003 war. Khoury's book is listed in the bibliography but not in the index. It is cited in endnotes to the preface and elsewhere without reference to the nuanced argument made in her book about how the regime governed in wartime, with institutional adaptations that included, but by no means limited to, terror. For example, she says that, during the war with Iran, the Ba`th party was transformed 'from a corporatist party with an agenda focused on economic and social development to a national security and

counterinsurgency party' (7), a dynamic transformation that contrasts with Faust's more static description of how Saddam and the Ba`th functioned from beginning to end.

Other important contributions to the literature are used minimally or not at all. Faust lists Hanna Batatu (1978), Eric Davis (2005), Phebe Marr (2004) and Achim Rohde (2010a) in the bibliography, but cites them infrequently to provide support to particular points in his argumentation. For example, Davis is cited to illustrate the lack of full commitment by the political elite to Saddam's ideology (2005: 11–12), although Davis devotes his book to the importance of construction of 'historical memory' by Saddam's regime to garner legitimacy with and cooperation from the citizenry. Other comparably useful sources that were published early enough for Faust to have considered them, such as Baram et al. (2010), Dawisha (2013, 2009), Al-Khafaji (2004), Marr (2012) and Yousif (2013), are not included at all. The limited situating of Faust's work in the context of the relevant literature gives the volume a tone more of a political treatise than of an academic argument.

Although none of the authors mentioned in the previous paragraphs would disagree that Saddam became an increasingly authoritarian, ruthless and often brutal dictator, or that Ba`th-run Iraq was a non-democratic one-party state, all of them go to some lengths to put the struggle to create a modern nation state in Iraq and the evolution of authoritarian rule in its historical, regional and international context. Baram et al. posit that 'the overarching consensus among all the contributors to this [their edited] volume is that Iraq's history and its present are interconnected and shaped by a number of factors, some enforced from the outside and some grown out of particular and historically changing configurations within Iraqi society' (2010: 7). For example, in Chapter 1 in that volume, Phebe Marr discusses the ups and downs of 'Iraqi' national identity over the course of the twentieth century, and argues that even in the post-2003

political turmoil ‘there are forces working toward the recreation of a sense of all-Iraqi nationalism’ (2010: 33–34). In her 2012 book (not listed in Faust’s bibliography), Marr describes the assumption by Saddam of the presidency in 1979 as a structural shift from rule by the party’s collective leadership to ‘a personal, autocratic regime dependent for security – and, increasingly, for decisions – on Saddam Hussein and his close family members and cohorts’ (2012: 175), but she immediately puts this transformation into the context of the Islamic revolution in Iran, which many in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, not just Saddam, viewed as a potential threat to the regime, the state and the eastern flank of the Arab World (2012: 175, 179).

Isam Al-Khafaji’s weighty tome (2004) presents an analysis of the evolution of the Mashreq in the twentieth century, with Iraq a crucial example in terms of the emergence of and conflicting interests among rising and declining social forces. For example, the Iraqi elite of the 1950s – landowners, merchants, senior bureaucrats – were not a ‘traditional’ aristocracy leftover from the Ottoman period, but rather a bourgeoisie that arose out of changes in property relations and economic opportunity under the British mandate and the monarchy (2004: 290–98). This elite was challenged, in turn, by the rising social forces of the late monarchical era, forces that supported the establishment of republics with new leaders proposing to build modern nation states comparable to those of Europe. Such rapid transitions to economic independence, in Iraq’s case financed by oil revenues, through state-led growth and social and human development, engendered a process that, in its turn, gave rise to new class configurations and ruling elites and encouraged the centralization of power (Chapter 6).

In his political history of Iraq from the time of the mandate to about 2010, Dawisha (2009, 2013) describes in more detail the dynamic social and economic forces that characterized the late monarchy and the conditions that gave impetus to its overthrow in 1958. On one hand,

there had been important positive changes, with the rulers using part of the oil revenues to finance infrastructure and transportation, to increase access to education, and to expand the civil service. The educated middle class had grown to 28 per cent of the population by 1958, mostly employed in the public sector. From 1946 to 1954, before a major clamp-down, there had been some opening to democratic processes, at least among the elite that dominated the parliament and executive, as well as more freedom of the press and assembly, and a broadened scope for nationalist parties, including the Ba`th, which was founded in 1952, and the Communist movement to organize among the urban middle and working classes.

On the other hand, Dawisha reports that the negatives of the late monarchy period were weighing heavily on national consciousness. Two-thirds of youth remained illiterate as of 1956, only 20% of households had electricity or running water, 70% lived in poverty and 55% of agricultural land was still held by just 1% of landowners, while the bulk of the peasantry was land-poor or landless. A steady stream of rural–urban migration fed the formation of impoverished slums of alienated discontents in the cities. The educated middle class grew increasingly sensitive to the vast disparity between the tiny corrupt ruling class and the large population of still illiterate urban and rural poor (2009: 117–19). The middle class was

becoming increasingly susceptible to revolutionary ideas. It grew to resent the wealth of the upper class, its corruption and conspicuous consumption, its dogged hold on power, and its seeming symbiotic relationship with, indeed dependence on, the despised old colonial power – more than enough elements and conditions for a cataclysmic change in the political order. (2009: 119)

Like the other scholars mentioned above, Dawisha does not excuse the brutality and ruthlessness of Saddam's regime; indeed he states that it was unprecedented by the standards of earlier authoritarian regimes in Iraq, turning into 'a country that was held hostage to the will and whim of one omnipresent tyrant' (2009: 241). However, he makes this turn comprehensible, not just as the megalomaniacal project of a single dictator, which seems to be Faust's interpretation, but as the extreme expression of tendencies present in the political structures of Iraq and other Arab nations in the post-Second World War era as socio-economic systems were disrupted and transformed. While 'the demise of the monarchy was met with almost universal approval by the Iraqi people' (Dawisha 2009: 171), Dawisha argues that the first sets of non-Ba`th republican leaders from 1958 to 1968, `Abd al-Karim Qasim and the `Aref brothers, `Abd al-Salam and `Abd al-Rahman, centralized power in their own hands and intensified a 'culture of violence' initiated under the monarchy in changeovers from one regime to the next, rather than the democracy, however vaguely conceived, expected by the populace (2009: 172–80, 207–08).

Even as they concentrated political power, however, 'it was clearly the intention of the new rulers to alleviate what had been the monarchy's Achilles' heel: the pitifully wide gap between the obscenely rich and the abject poor' (Dawisha 2009: 181), which they managed through agrarian reforms, construction of urban housing, schools and medical facilities, expansion of employment and changing personal status law. The underprivileged Shi`a and women groups benefitted disproportionately from these changes. Using oil revenues to finance infrastructure investment, as well as programmes that changed the socio-economic structure, and taking a stab at central planning similar to `Abd al-Nasir's regime in Egypt but then backing away from it, republican leaders in Iraq, including Saddam Hussein, left a broader and better



supported role for the private sector than in Egypt and cultivated a well-educated and admirably competent middle class of professionals and civil servants (2009: 179–83).

Yousif (2013) argues that republican Iraq was a successful example, continuing under the Ba`th in the 1970s–1980s, of state-led development based on the investment of hydrocarbon revenues for physical infrastructure, growth of industry and commerce, social welfare and human development. Even as Saddam further centralized power in his own hands, the economy boomed in the 1970s and society seemed to be making progress. Even in the ‘lost decade of the 1980s’, through the devastating war with Iran 1980–1988, the fall in oil prices and revenues and consequent economic stagnation, these institutions continued to function. However, Saddam became increasingly paranoid and desperate to protect his rule. This desperation led to the ill-fated disaster of the invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf War of 1991, the uprisings by the Shi`a and the Kurds and the imposition of harsh international sanctions that led to deconstruction of the economy and reversal of the gains of the previous decades. Yousif (2016) goes on to argue that the exodus of the middle class – professionals, private business owners and civil servants – and the US occupation’s de-Ba`thification campaign led to further disorganization of social and economic institutions and to the decline of capacity in governance. After 2003, Iraq continued to suffer from the same severe social fragmentation and economic dislocation as it did before 2003, due to the failure of the post-2003 regimes, under occupation and after, to develop the social and political institutions needed to put the society back together.

While Faust mentions Sassoon’s volume (2012) as an example of research in the archives discovered after 2003, he does not engage with Sassoon’s arguments or mention that the work covers the same period and topic as his own.<sup>4</sup> Sassoon’s approach differs in three ways. First, he stresses that his archival research at the Conflict Records Research Center in

Washington was cross-checked and balanced by other kinds of information, including two other sets of archives, audiotapes of Ba`th leadership meetings, open-source material like newspapers of the time, and interviews with Iraqis who had lived in Iraq during Saddam's rule. Sassoon warns against the possible lacunae and misinterpretations that work in a single set of archives alone could leave unexamined (2012: 14–15). While Faust seems to be aware of this danger (pp. xviii, xx–xxi), his analysis rests almost exclusively on the documents in the BRCC archives.

Second, Sassoon takes issue with the idea that the Saddam Hussein's regime was 'totalitarian' in the extreme sense (2012: 7-8, 24).<sup>5</sup> Faust presents Saddam as a unique demon, not as a product of history or the interaction of social forces, shaped from the same mould of totalitarianism as Stalin and Hitler, with whom Faust compares him a number of times. Faust defines 'totalitarianism' as the undermining of all previous political, social and civil institutions and the imposition of new institutions that a single ruthless leader aims fully to control. Sassoon argues, in contrast, that Saddam did not have a Stalinesque programme to plan centrally the economy or use 'draconian measures to industrialize' (2012: 5). Furthermore, while Stalin came out of the Second World War a hero, Saddam's legitimacy was undermined by mis-leading Iraq into the unique cauldron of two major ill-fated wars, civil conflicts with the Kurds and the 1991 uprisings, and then more than a decade of strict international sanctions. Yet, Saddam's political skill and flexibility in adapting to shifting social forces in difficult times rather than just dominating them, for example, turning not just to intensified repression but also to tribalism and Islamism, helped the Ba`th regime to pull off the remarkable feat of surviving for 35 years and holding the country together until the 2003 war (2012: 5–7).

Third, Sassoon does not see the socio-economic structure as just a system of carrots complementing Saddam's sticks to keep his citizenry in line. Faust posits that Saddam's arsenal

of weapons in pursuit of absolute totalitarian domination included four dimensions: ideology (the leader, the party and the nation are all one), organization (iron-clad control of the party, the military and the bureaucracy), terror to punish real and intimidate possible opposition (as described by Makiya [1998] and in depth in Faust's book) and 'enticement' – the manipulation of rewards such as access to employment, education, housing, healthcare and the other elements of state-led development – to win the population's support or at least compliance. Sassoon seems to view the system of socio-economic and human development, including the civil service, as functioning normally until it was eroded during the 1990s' sanctions era, as the Ba`th continued the modern-nation-building precedents set in the later years under the monarchy (1946–1954) and under republican governments in the pre-Ba`th decade of 1958–1968 – what was, one might add, simply the standard model in former colonies and former mandated territories all over the Middle East in the twentieth century.

The causes of the deep political and social fissures and descent into ethno-sectarian conflict, as well as the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of government, in Iraq post 2003 are addressed by Baram et al. (2010) in the introduction to their volume, by Sassoon (2010), by Yousif (2016) and by Dawisha (2013), Sassoon (2012) and Faust in codas to their respective volumes. Faust's postscript places the blame squarely on 'the legacy of ba`thification'. Faust also projects that, without US-led intervention, Saddam probably would have continued on his pre-2003 trajectory, and that, when confronted with an Arab Spring uprising like those in the other authoritarian republics in 2011, he would have responded with non-compromising violence similar to Al-Asad in Syria but with even greater vengeance. The implication is that the United States did the right thing in intervening in 2003, although the occupying power was clearly unprepared was to deal with the consequences. Baram et al., Dawisha and Sassoon, like Yousif,

seem to see this dysfunctionality as a dialectic between the evolving history of Iraqi politics, including the heritage of Saddam's Ba`thi rule, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the inability of the United States' occupying authority and subsequent interventions to address the post-2003 disintegration. As Marr (2012: 379) says in the conclusion to her summary of the challenges confronting Iraq, the most important ingredients for resolution will be time for Iraqis themselves to sort it out and 'a more benign external environment' that allows them to get on with it.

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<sup>1</sup> The NSEP programme was established in 1991 to encourage the study of languages in parts of the world deemed critical for US national security purposes. Its activity in the Arab World was expanded after September 11, 2001. It provides scholarships to undergraduate students and fellowships to graduate students. About the latter, the website says:

Boren Fellows represent a vital pool of highly motivated individuals who wish to work in the federal national security arena. In exchange for funding, Boren Fellows commit to working in the federal government for at least one year after graduation

([https://www.borenawards.org/boren\\_fellowship/basics.html](https://www.borenawards.org/boren_fellowship/basics.html)).



<sup>2</sup> Kanan Makiya became well-known outside Iraq as the author, under the pseudonym Samir al-Khalil, of *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (1998).

<sup>3</sup> The reference section at the end of this review includes only the major works, and not the many papers, that Faust included in his bibliography for these authors, plus other sources, some by the same authors, that I introduce.

<sup>4</sup> For a sample of reviews of Sassoon's (2012) book, see Matthews (2015) and Owen (2013).

<sup>5</sup> For a sorting out and critique of the historiography of research on Ba`thist Iraq, see Rohde (2010b), where he concludes that 'neither the intentionalist nor the functionalist line of interpretation in and of themselves seem to offer a sufficiently complex model to adequately capture the functioning of a dictatorship' (2010b: 136).