The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy

Part three: The Iraqi Baath Party, from its origins to political power

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16 March 2004

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This is the third in a series of articles examining the history of Iraq and its relations with the United States. The first article, *posted March 12, discussed the social relations of the country and its history up to the 1950s. The* second part, *posted March 13, dealt with Iraq's post-war history up to the Baath-led coup of 1963. This article examines the history of the Baath party and the character of its rule through the 1970s.*

The origins of the Baath Party

The Baath ("Renaissance") Party that eventually came to power in the 1960s was itself a product of a long historical development. It was formed in the late 1930s out of an amalgamation of a few smaller groups under the ideological leadership of Michel Aflaq. It initially had influence primarily in Syria, but gradually spread to other Arab countries, including Egypt, Yemen and Iraq.

The ideological development of Aflaq is significant and no doubt mirrors the political development of many young Arabs during the 1930s and 1940s. Aflaq was educated in France, where he encountered the ideas of Marx and Lenin in the late 1920s. According to a 1944 account written by Aflaq and another early leader of the party, Salah al Din Bitar, "We cam e to socialism by the way of thought and science and found ourselves before a new, masterly, and fascinating explanation of all the political and social problems which harass the world generally and from which we Arabs in particular suffer." [1]

However, the betrayals of Stalinism and the French Communist Party in the 1930s turned them away from the CP. This was the period of the Popular Front in France, when the French CP actively supported the bourgeois coalition government headed by Socialist Party Premier Leon Blum. This meant, in practice, the subordination by the CP of working class movements in French-dominated regions—including Syria—to the foreign policy interests of French imperialism.

Aflaq and Bitar cite the growing indications of the "transformation of the Soviet Union into a nationalist state" and its "abandonment of international communism" as a rationale for seeking to build a new movement.

The movement that they formed—after 1952 formally known as the Arab Baath Socialist Party—did not offer a genuine alternative to the CP and the bourgeois nationalist parties of the region. It was from the beginning an internally contradictory organization that combined appeals to the socialist aspirations of broad sections of the population with a pan-Arabism that denied the existence of any fundamental conflict between the interests of the Arab bourgeoisie and those of the working class.

These contradictions were expressed in the triad that the party advanced: "Unity, Freedom, Socialism." The first of the three was explained in more detail by Aflaq when he argued, "All differences among the sons [of the nation] are incidental and false and will vanish with the awakening of the Arab consciousness." [2]

Yet the ideals of socialism could be realized only insofar as the working class recognized its fundamental differences with the capitalist class, even in countries with a limited economic development.

The aim of the national bourgeoisie—whether expressed by Egypt's Nasser, by Iraq's Qasim, or by the Baath Party itself—was to strike a more favorable deal with imperialism. The independent interests of the working class, however, require the overthrow of imperialism and the capitalist system upon which it is based. The exploitation of the working population, the vast social inequality in the region and the suppression of the national aspirations of the masses could be ended only through a wholesale transformation of social relations—a transformation that the national bourgeoisie was both incapable of and organically opposed to carrying out.

In practice, whenever the Baath Party came to power—as it did in Syria in the late 1950s and in Iraq in the 1960s—it abandoned socialism in favor of "unity," that is, the subordination of the working class to the national bourgeoisie.

Rise to power

The Baath Party's rise to prominence generated deep divisions

within the politically heterogeneous organization. A section of the party took a left position and briefly gained ascendancy at the party's Sixth National Congress, held in Syria in October 1963. These forces called for "socialist planning," "collective farms run by peasants," and "workers' democratic control of production." They accused the party of abandoning its socialist roots and its commitment to the interests of the working masses.

In the Iraqi party, the right wing was represented by military officers. They moved to deport supporters of the left faction from the country and consolidate control. The division "was accelerated by the coming out of the Baathist-controlled General Union of Workers at this juncture for 'the crushing of the heads of the bourgeois who have betrayed the party,' the execution of the men of capital who were spiriting their money out of the country, and the immediate socialization of factories and collectivization of agriculture." [3]

The consolidation of control by the right wing was significant in another regard: it marked the rise to prominence within the party of Saddam Hussein. Hussein had just returned from exile in 1963 and assumed a position in the party second only to that of Ahmad Hassan Bakr. Hussein's ascent was intimately bound up with the growing influence in the party of the military—in particular, a large contingent of officers from Hussein's home town of Tikrit. Saddam Hussein played a critical role in attacking the left faction in the 1963 Congress.

Given his role in the Baath Party, it is no wonder that Saddam Hussein became an object of interest to American and British imperialism. A biographical sketch of the future dictator was drawn up by the British Embassy in Baghdad in 1969. It reported that Hussein "first came into prominence when chosen by the Baath Party leadership in 1959 to [participate in the assassination of] Kassem [Qasim]."

It went on to note his rising status: "Provisional secretary general of the Regional Baath Command after November 1963. Established himself thereafter as leading Party theorist in the background, emerging progressively into the limelight in 1969.... Appointed vice chairman of the R.C.C. [Revolutionary Command Council] and deputy to the president November 1969, when he was also confirmed as deputy secretary general of the Iraqi Baath." [4]

In a telling comment, the British described him as "A presentable young man. Initially regarded as a Party extremist, but responsibility may mellow him." That is, the British saw in Hussein a man with whom it was possible to do business. Despite conflicts and disputes, this was the basic attitude of the US as well for much of the 1970s and 1980s.

The final success of the party in the late 1960s was not due to any real popular support, but rather to its ability to win to its side a sufficient number of people in important military posts. Many of these were from Tikrit.

The party by this time was dominated by Sunni Muslims from the Tikrit area. A great number of Shiite supporters—particularly those from poorer districts in the southern cities—had left in 1963, following the left faction led by Ali Salih as Sadi. (Sadi briefly formed another party, the Revolutionary Workers' Party, which quickly disintegrated.)

While leadership of the party rested formally in the hands of Bakr, Saddam Hussein had great influence over the intelligence and police apparatus. Increasingly, it was Hussein who controlled the main levers of power in the new regime. Command over the security apparatus was critical, as the party depended upon repression and intimidation to maintain its rule. Any hint of an independent mobilization of the working class was met with violence, generally at the hands of the special forces attached to Saddam Hussein's National Security Bureau.

Despite its anti-democratic methods, however, the Baath regime was not a government of pure reaction. It was a bourgeois nationalist government, and, as such, it pursued policies similar to those adopted by other states to maneuver between the US and the Soviet Union and contain the explosive social contradictions that dominated the region.

It passed reform measures to benefit the peasantry, decreasing the amount of land that large landholders were able to acquire and doing away with compensation for expropriated estates. It introduced health insurance and education in the countryside and maintained state subsidies on bread to keep prices low. The government also extended social security and disability benefits to laborers in the cities.

To pay for these social reform measures and gain some independence from Western oil companies, the regime expanded the role of the state-run oil company. In April 1972, it launched a program of nationalized oil extraction from the North Rumailah oil fields with money borrowed from the Soviet Union. In response to harassment and threats from the foreign-owned Iraq Petroleum Company, the government nationalized the company in June of that year. Iraq was the first Arab country to take over a Western-owned oil firm.

Oil revenues grew sharply during the decade—from $75 million in 1972 to $8 billion in 1975 to $26.3 billion by 1980. These revenues allowed the government to continue its state-run services while vastly expanding the military and security apparatus.

To be continued.

Notes:

1. Batatu, Hanna, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1978, p. 726
2. *Ibid*., p. 731
3. *Ibid*., p. 1,025
4. Confidential memo from the British Embassy, 15 November, 1969. Declassified and published by the National Security Archive, *http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv*.