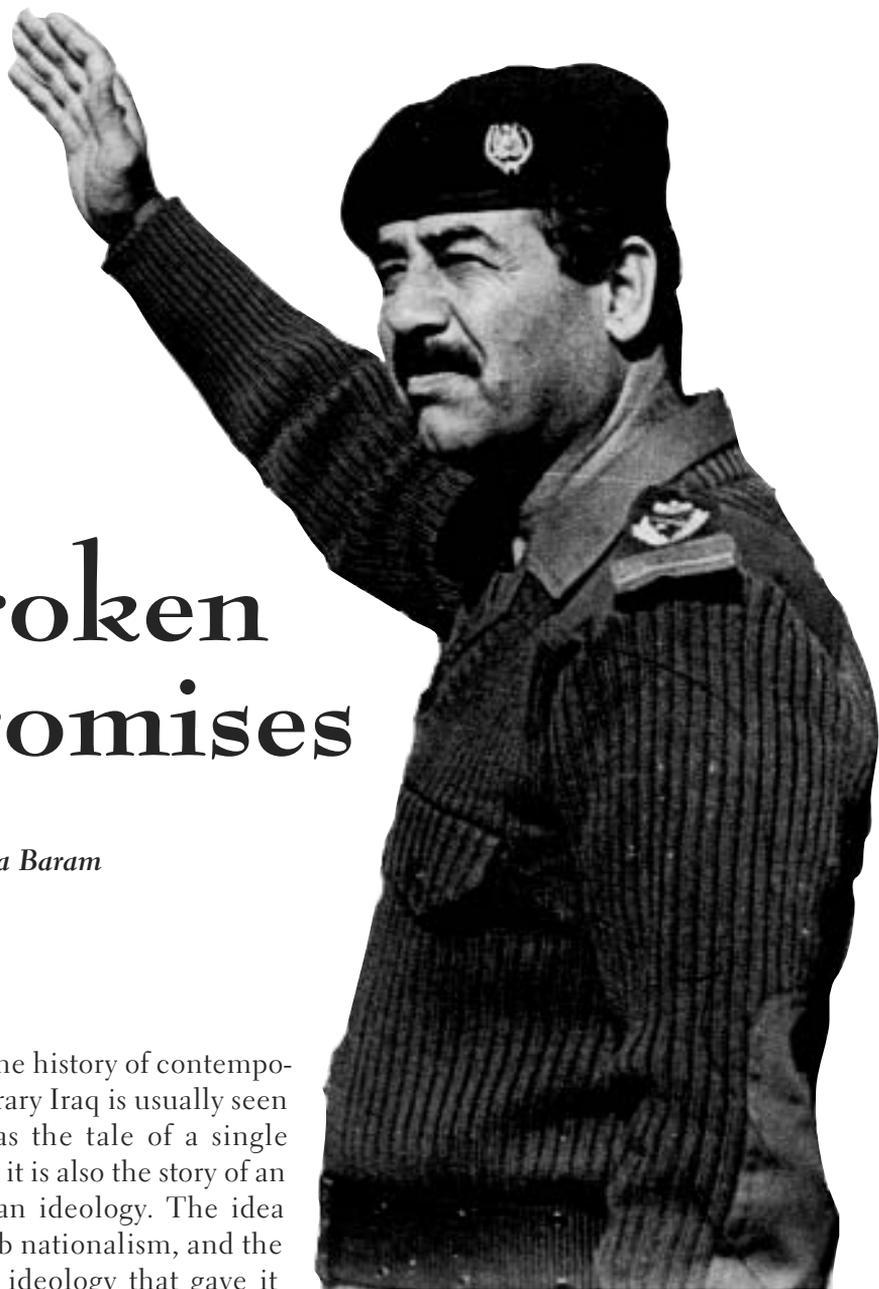


# Broken Promises

by Amatzia Baram

**T**he history of contemporary Iraq is usually seen as the tale of a single tyrant, but it is also the story of an idea and an ideology. The idea is pan-Arab nationalism, and the particular ideology that gave it form in Iraq, and in neighboring Syria, is Baathism. From its founding in Damascus by French-educated intellectuals during the 1940s, the Baath Party propounded the doctrines that would guide and inspire Syrian and Iraqi leaders, including Saddam Hussein, through decades of tumultuous and ultimately tragic history. Long before Saddam's downfall in the spring of 2003, the Baath program had betrayed and devoured its own ideals: The quest for Arab unity led to wars of conquest, freedom became oppression, and socialism descended into exploitation and poverty. Saddam Hussein may be gone, but the pan-Arab and Baath legacies remain forces with which anyone contemplating the future of Iraq must reckon.



During the 1930s, when they were still young high school teachers in Damascus, Michel Aflaq (1910–89) and Salah ad-Din al-Bitar (1912–80), the two men who would go on to create the Baath Party in 1940, had few fully formed ideas. One idea, though, was as unambiguous as it was powerful: the need to unify all the Arab lands into one political entity. In what would become the party’s holy trinity of principles—Unity, Freedom, Socialism—unity would be by far the most cherished.

Much like the German romantic nationalist ideologue Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814),

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whom they admired, Aflaq and Bitar saw language as the basis of national identity. All Arabic speakers, they argued, must go through a mental revolution, forsake all selfishness, and dedicate themselves to the great Arab national cause. This would bring about a “resurrection” (*baath*) that would awaken the Arab nation from its slumber and lead to the birth of a united Arab state stretching from the

Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf. Through such a state, and only through it, the Arabs would be able to end their long decline, retake their rightful place among the nations, and carry “an eternal message” to humanity.

There’s no reason to doubt the genuine commitment of these teachers and their early disciples to the goal of Arab unity. Indeed, when Syria experienced political turmoil in late 1957 and early 1958, Syria’s Baath party, with Bitar in the post of foreign minister, pushed the rest of the country’s political elite toward unification with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt. It wasn’t only ideological zeal for Arab unity that inspired the Baath. The political crisis in Syria threatened them, and they believed that Nasser would provide them with protection, while they would provide him with ideological guidance. Yet their commitment should not be underestimated. When the Egyptian president demanded a fully integrated Arab state rather than the federal one they preferred, the Baath leaders immediately consented. When Nasser insisted that he serve as the sole president, they agreed. They even volunteered to disband the Baath Party and integrate it into Nasser’s mass political organization. A deal was struck in 1958, but the resulting United Arab Republic had a short and stormy life, lasting only until 1961. Yet when it dissolved,

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Aflaq, still fully wedded to the ideal of unity, refused to sign the secession document, and Bitar, who did sign, later regretted his decision.

The sediment of failure left by the dissolution of the United Arab Republic turned into a poison that killed every subsequent attempt at unification. The self-interest of the party and its leaders became paramount. When Baath regimes came to power in Baghdad and Damascus within a month of each other early in 1963, both again turned to Cairo with hopes of unification. But the discussions very quickly became acrimonious. The three countries did sign a unification protocol on April 17, 1963, but the marriage was never consummated. Not even the two Baath states, Iraq and Syria, would ever be able to unite.

**T**he Iraqi Baath regime was driven from power later in 1963 by General Abd as-Salam Arif, a Nasserist with no interest in unification with the Syrians, and when the Baath regained control in 1968 under Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, Baghdad and Damascus made some halfhearted attempts to forge unity. But these efforts soon gave way to growing hostility, brought on in part by each regime's meddling in the other's country. Despite their pan-Arab rhetoric, both Baath governments were minority regimes. The Iraqi leadership was essentially Sunni Arab (though it did include some Shia) in a majority-Shia land, while in Damascus, a few Sunni Arabs notwithstanding, the Baath Party was rooted in the small Alawite Arab minority. Neither regime could resist the temptation to appeal to the disgruntled majority across the border in the name of "true" pan-Arabism. For a time, the necessity of presenting a united front against Anwar as-Sadat's Egypt after the 1979 Camp David agreements did bring the regimes closer together, but unity talks again failed miserably.



*Michel Aflaq*

Meanwhile, the Iraqis began introducing major changes in Baath ideology, especially after Saddam assumed the presidency in 1979. The party's founders had envisaged a united Arab state, founded on egalitarian principles, with all earlier Arab states and people dissolved into one homogenous superstate. But the Iraqi Baath began moving toward an Iraqi-centered, imperial pan-Arab concept. The Iraqi people, Saddam and his court ideologues argued, would never dissolve and disappear. The Iraqi nation had been born many thousands of years ago; it had established the earliest and greatest civilizations on earth, starting with Sumer and Akkad, through Babylon, Assyria, Chaldea, and the Abbasid caliphate, and culminating in the Baath regime. Iraq was destined for greatness—it would lead the whole Arab nation. For the foreseeable future, therefore, it would be more important to pursue Iraqi interests than to sacrifice Iraq

on the altar of Arab causes. Naturally, the new theory did not have much appeal to other Arab states.

By the time the Iran-Iraq War broke out in 1980, relations between the Baath governments in Iraq and Syria had deteriorated to such an extent that Syria sided with non-Arab Shia Iran. During the Kuwait crisis of 1990–91, the Syrians went so far as to send troops to Saudi Arabia to oppose the Iraqis. By the late 1990s, relations between the Baath twins saw some improvement, but mutual mistrust still prevailed. And in fall 2002, Syria joined all 14 other members of the United Nations Security Council in endorsing Resolution 1441, which called on Iraq to disarm (though Damascus opposed the U.S.-led invasion that followed).

During the entire period since the founding of the Baath movement, only one form of unification in the Arab world has met with any success: unification through military force. In 1976 Syria conquered Lebanon, which it still occupies (but hasn't annexed). And in 1990, Iraq briefly swallowed and annexed Kuwait—a step Saddam justified partly in pan-Arab terms. Even a unification project that at first seemed very successful, the

1990 union of North and South Yemen, led within four years to rupture and war. Reunification did occur, but only through conquest.

Sixty years after the birth of the Baath Party, the pan-Arab promise it embodied has yielded bitter fruit. The mirage of Arab unity sucked

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Baath Iraq and Syria and Nasserist Egypt into very costly political adventures—a failed unification, chronic meddling in one another's domestic affairs—and a variety of military adventures against other Arab states. Pan-Arab aspirations also led these regimes to promise complete salvation to the Palestinians and the total destruction of Israel, promises they could not keep. These assurances not only led the three Arab nations into disastrous wars against the Jewish state, they also kept the Palestinians waiting for the promised redemption, and prevented them from reconciling themselves to the idea of a compromise solution.

The Baath were no different from others in the Arab world in bitterly opposing Israel, but they were different from some others in propounding an ideology that was, at least in the beginning, notably secular. As it was formulated by Michel Aflaq in the 1940s, Baath thought committed the party to the principle of a secular state. Aflaq's own origins as a Christian Arab had something to do with his notion of a language-based Arab nation committed to secularism—how else could he ensure his acceptance as an equal by his Muslim compatriots? In the 1940s, however, these ideas were also popular among educated young Muslims who were the product of the state's secular school system and who saw in them a way to marry their Arab-Islamic identity to the modern spirit.

“Islam,” Aflaq told his disciples, is “equal to other religions in the Arab State,” thus excluding the possibility that there would be any official religion. A secularized state would “free religion from [the influence of] political circumstances” and enable it to flourish and exert a positive moral influence on people. The state should be “based on a social foundation, Arab nationalism, and a moral one: freedom.” There’s not a single explicit mention of Islam or religion in the text of the party’s founding constitution.

But Aflaq also needed to make sure that his fledgling movement would take root in the larger community, where Islamic history and heroes had great meaning even to those who were not deeply religious. No wonder, then, that he called upon all Arabs to admire Islam and the Prophet, because of Islam’s “important role in shaping Arab history and Arab nationalism.” Aflaq also insisted that the Baath movement opposed atheism, and that “it is impossible to separate [Baathism] from religion” —an equivocation that would later catch up with him.

**W**hen the Baath Party returned to power in Iraq in 1968, it walked a tightrope between its traditional secularism and popular opinion. In arenas that had been regulated along fairly secular lines under the monarchy (1921–58)—education, entertainment, and even alcohol consumption—it adopted similar policies. Its campaign to trumpet the greatness of the pre-Islamic “Iraqis” (ancient Mesopotamians) and Arabs was another sign of its secularism. But the regime also paid lip service to Islam. In two early constitutions, Islam was identified as the “state religion.” The main all-Islamic festivals and holidays were brought under the government’s umbrella, as were some specifically Shia ones. Minimal restrictions were imposed on public activities that might infuriate Islamic traditionalists, such as blatant public breaking of the fast during Ramadan. In other words, the regime adopted a populist and pragmatic (or opportunistic) policy of allowing the secular public—perhaps a majority of the population—to continue its unorthodox way of life, while keeping the more orthodox circles reasonably happy.

It became much harder to straddle the secular-religious divide after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rose to power in Tehran in 1979. The Iranian leader and Shia holy man made very effective use of religious rhetoric, accusing Baghdad of rejecting Islam and embracing atheism. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), Saddam worried that members of Iraq’s Shia majority might side with their coreligionists in Iran, and his regime tried to portray Khomeini as a Persian heathen who had nothing to offer Iraq’s Arab Shia. Increasingly, Baghdad tried to wrap itself in the colors of Islam. One of the oddest manifestations of this strategy came in June 1989, when Baghdad announced the death of Michel Aflaq. A party communiqué announced that just before his death Aflaq had “embraced Islam as his religion.” In death, the old ideologue’s equivocations finally overtook him.

As the 1990–91 Kuwait crisis deepened, Saddam increasingly turned

to Islam, no doubt hoping to rally Iraqis and to shore up Islamic support in the international arena. The Iraqi president portrayed himself as the leader of the Arab nation and the Islamic world, and he even started portraying himself as the bearer of the message to humankind. On January 14, 1991, one day before the deadline set by the United Nations for Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, Saddam commanded that Iraqis add the slogan *Allahu Akbar* ("God is great") to the national flag.

With the defeat in Kuwait, a Shia uprising (brutally suppressed in March 1991), and the increasing deterioration of the economy, Saddam took more steps to Islamize Iraqi institutions. Beginning in 1994, a host of sharia laws transformed the Iraqi penal code. Eventually, he even prohibited the public consumption of alcohol—reversing an 80-year-old policy. Robbery and car theft were now punished by amputation of the right hand at the wrist. "In case of repetition the left foot should be amputated at the ankle," said the official decree. Iraqi television dwelled on the offenders and their blood-drenched limbs—Islamization had the added benefit of providing the regime yet another means of terrorizing its fear-stricken population.

**A**fter unity, freedom was the Baaths' most important ideal. At first, it had two different meanings: liberation from foreign occupation, and internal democracy. After the French left Syria and General Abd al-Karim Qasim toppled Iraq's pro-British monarchy in 1958, internal party democracy took on greater importance. And the principle was reasonably well observed. Before the Egyptian-Syrian-Iraqi unity talks in 1963, Baath spokesmen even provoked Egyptian wrath by speaking with disapproval of Nasser's "dictatorial" rule. This, an angry Nasser later informed his Baath interlocutors, was one reason the talks failed.

The 1947 Baath Constitution is full of provisions that sound like genuine commitments to Western liberal-democratic principles. Aflaq and Bitar, having been educated in French-run Syria and graduated from the Sorbonne, were well acquainted with Western European democracy. The document declares that the "freedom of speech, assembly, [and religious] belief is sacred, and no authority can undermine it." It also says: "The judicial authority will be independent. It will be free from interference by other authorities and enjoy total immunity." There are many similar provisions. But the constitution also left a small escape hatch in Article 20: "The rights of citizenship are granted in their totality" only to the citizen "devoted to the Arab homeland and who has no connection to any racist [or factious] organization."

In any event, days after the party came to power in Iraq for the first time in February 1963, its leaders began a massacre of their political rivals. Hundreds of real and suspected communists were murdered during the first days, and arrests, murders, assassinations, and executions continued until General Arif removed the party from power in November 1963. When the Iraqi Baath came to power again in 1968, the government promptly

conducted a mock espionage trial and public hanging of nine young Jews in Baghdad's Liberation Square. As foreign minister Tariq Aziz noted a few years later, the public hanging of the Jews was a matter of expediency; many Iraqis believed (correctly, it seems) that the first Baath regime had come to power with the support of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and their successors felt compelled to demonstrate their determination to "eradicate the espionage networks." By 1968, the Iraqi Baath's internal security czar was a young, little-known man from the town of Tikrit, Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Nasiri al-Tikriti. Arrest, torture, and, occasionally, the assassination of suspected communists and other enemies were now the order of the day. Iraq had become what was probably the most coercive police state in the Middle East (which is saying a lot).

After Saddam jailed, executed, murdered, or drove out of the country many real and perceived enemies of the party, he turned against his own rivals within the Baath. The lucky ones lost only their jobs. In 1979, he became president by forcing his elderly relative, President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, to resign. Then Saddam initiated a sweeping purge. He began his campaign at a session with scores of the party's most senior officials by conducting a witch-hunt that would have been the envy even of Joseph Stalin. As the scene was recorded on videotape, members of the highest party and state bodies, many in a state of shock, were dragged out of the hall to face party firing squads. Eventually, hundreds of party officials and senior army officers were executed.

**A**ny shred of respect for human rights or other democratic values that had survived the earlier years of Baath Party rule now disappeared. Party membership was made compulsory for many Iraqis in responsible positions. By joining, they accepted severe political and security limitations, including some that promised a death sentence if violated. By 1989 the number of party members had swelled to 1.5 million, but the privileged rank (one of four ranks of membership) remained strictly controlled, not exceeding 25,000. Interviews with ex-members suggest that the last vestiges of internal party democracy soon vanished.

After Ayatollah Khomeini's triumphant return to Tehran in 1979, Iraq saw a wave of pro-Khomeini demonstrations by its own Shia citizens. The Baath regime responded with severe repression. By the autumn of 1980, hundreds had been executed—including an ayatollah, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr—and thousands jailed. Tens of thousands of Shia were forced to cross the border into Iran. As if not to be outdone in brutality, Saddam's Baath counterpart in Damascus, President Hafiz al-Asad, in 1982 ordered his special forces to bombard the city of Hama, where the Muslim Brotherhood had been active. At least 20,000 residents were killed. Baghdad did not lag behind in brutality for very long. In an operation named "War Booty," launched in response to a Kurdish revolt in the north in 1987 and 1988, Saddam's troops murdered between 50,000 and 100,000 Kurds, many of them women and children. And when Iraqi

## Iraq

*An aggrieved majority: Shia Muslims gather before Baghdad's Imam Musa al-Kazim mosque to honor a holy man who died more than a thousand years ago in a Sunni prison.*

Shia in the south revolted in March 1991, after the Persian Gulf War, the army slaughtered another 30,000 to 60,000 people. These massacres were beyond anything the party's founders could have imagined in their worst nightmares.

Despite these unrelenting horrors, the Baath regimes in Baghdad and Damascus carefully maintained all the trappings of democracy. Since 1980 Iraq has had an elected parliament, which is of course a rubber stamp. When the people went to the polls in 1995, more than 99 percent voted in support of Saddam's presidency; he got precisely 100 percent of the vote in 2002. By the beginning of 2003, both Iraq and Syria could boast presidential and parliamentary elections, along with a variety of newspapers, magazines, broadcasting outlets, labor unions, and other organizations. But the two most dictatorial regimes in the Arab world were, in this order, those of the Baath in Baghdad and Damascus.

In the economic realm, the Baath vision was inspired by the theories of the Fabian Society, the genteel and highly influential socialist intellectual movement of early-20th-century Britain. The state would control big industry and transport, banks, and internal and external trade. It would direct the course of economic development, and, of course, it would provide a guaranteed minimum standard of living for all.

Almost as soon as they came to power in Iraq and Syria, the Baath regimes embarked on major socioeconomic reforms and development projects. In 1969, Baghdad made a bid for support in the countryside, especially in the Shia areas, by substantially expanding the land reform that had been launched under General Qasim in 1958. It also created an extensive system of farm cooperatives (designed in part to give it greater control over the peasantry). The cooperatives, however, were an economic failure and had to be disbanded. After it nationalized the oil industry in





1972 and began reaping the benefits of the oil price boom of 1973–74, the regime started investing huge sums in heavy industry, roads, and water and electrical systems in the countryside. Health, education, and other government services took a quantum leap, and for the first time urban workers enjoyed something of a social safety net.

But this petrodollar-financed largesse for the common people was accompanied by a burst of semiofficial corruption on a very large scale. A stratum of new millionaires emerged, most of whom had made their fortunes through patron-client relationships with the regime's luminaries. Some had amassed their wealth by gaining monopolies on prize agricultural land, establishing thriving farms that enjoyed substantial state subsidies. Others had prospered thanks to lucrative contracts with the state. Still oth-

ers had enriched themselves by taking kickbacks from local and foreign companies.

From my own sources, mainly interviews, I have concluded that Saddam Hussein's family probably spearheaded the large-scale corruption in Iraq. When General Hussein Kamil, Saddam's son-in-law and paternal cousin, defected to Jordan in 1995, he was believed by well-informed Jordanian circles to have brought with him no less than \$30 million, which he could hardly have saved from his salary. By early 2003 Saddam's wife, Sajida, his elder son, Uday, and his half-brothers Barazan, Watban, and Sib'awi were multimillionaires in their own right. Most conspicuous, of course, was Saddam's own wealth, notably his many private palaces, some boasting huge proportions and exquisite appointments.

It's often said, incorrectly, that Saddam's corruption was no different from that of his predecessors. But the Hashemite monarchs who ruled from the 1920s to the 1950s had only two palaces. Their successor, General Qasim (1958–63), did not even have a home of his own. He spent his nights either at his mother's modest home or sleeping on a mattress on the floor of his office at the Ministry of Defense. And another of Iraq's dictators, Abd ar-Rahman Arif, worked for 20 years as a hotel manager in Turkey after he was toppled by the Baath because he had no other source of income. The Baath corrupted the Iraqi state more grievously than any other regime in the country's history.

After three decades in power, the Baath regime of Iraq and its twin in Syria managed to fulfill none of their founding principles—unity, freedom, or socialism. Some progress toward the last of these might be claimed, if socialism meant a limited social safety net, nationalization of the country's main economic assets, and a modest narrowing of the income gap between people in the capital city and those in the countryside. (There was also, one must point out, some improvement in the status of women.)

Yet in Iraq, two wars and more than a decade of international embargo—all the result of the Baath's deviation from their original ideals—destroyed the economy. By early 2003, most Iraqis were dependent on food rations received through the United Nations oil-for-food program. Syria's economy is in deep trouble, and despite some economic liberalization, the private sector is still very depressed. Corruption has been an enormous drain in both countries. These societies, in which state-sponsored violence has been ubiquitous, along with bribery, semiofficial smuggling, extortion, and kickbacks, fall far short of any meaningful socialist ideal.

**B**oth Baath states built huge bureaucracies employing educated people who, under a different socioeconomic system, would have become entrepreneurs in small and midsize enterprises and helped build the national economy. The only way out of this situation seems to be to end the state's stranglehold over the economy, to introduce reforms that ensure transparency, and to encourage private enterprise by offering loans on an equitable basis. None of this can happen without the removal of the Baath ruling elites.

As for Arab unity, the dream once seemed within reach, but by the 1960s, and especially the 1970s, it was no longer a realistic program. The Baath regimes continued to invoke pan-Arab nationalism in the service of their parochial interests. It served as rationalization for intervention, military and otherwise, in the affairs of rival Arab states and regimes. Thus, Syria's 1976 occupation of Lebanon and Iraq's annexation of Kuwait in 1990 were justified in part as necessary steps to save the Arab nation from its enemies. Far from fostering unity, the pan-Arab idea has helped destabilize the Arab world.

Freedom? Because pan-Arabism failed to bestow legitimacy on Saddam and his Syrian counterparts, both employed extremely harsh security measures—harsher than those in most other Arab states—making a mockery of the Baath promise of freedom.

**H**istory shows that pan-Arabism is a dangerous ideology, embraced by the most extreme, adventurous, and brutal dictatorships in the Middle East and too readily cited as a rationale for domestic and foreign aggression. Arab identity and culture are one thing, a pan-Arab political agenda quite another. In the future, it would make sense to lay the emphasis on local patriotism, be it Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian, or Jordanian, accompanied by a mild and tolerant form of Arab solidarity. Leaders who speak the language of pan-Arabism have too strong a tendency to speak over the heads of local leaders to the populations of neighboring countries. That is a recipe for long-term international instability.

State patriotism also holds some promise of easing the tensions between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq (and in Syria, too, though Kurds are a small minority there), and between the main Muslim groups. Arab nationalist ideology was used as a veneer to conceal the rule of minority groups—mostly Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Alawite Arabs in Syria. Few of Iraq's Shia were ever attracted to the pan-Arab cause. They realized that it served to legitimize the rule of a Sunni Arab minority in Iraq, and that in a larger pan-Arab nation they would be drowned in a Sunni Arab majority. But in Iraq they would be a majority. Iraqi patriotism is not a perfect solution to the Shia-Sunni split, but perhaps it can help mitigate the conflict.

There's good reason, however, to believe that in the future Iraq will be able to avoid the tide of Islamization that has beset its neighbors in the region. When a regime in an Arab-Islamic country does not enjoy reasonable legitimacy, it's not uncommon to appeal to Islamic sentiment in times of stress. Egypt and Syria tilted toward the Islamization of public life in the 1990s. Iraq leaped. In a post-Saddam Iraq, the state will need to show respect for Islam, but most of the measures adopted by the Baath regime will have to be reversed. A more legitimate regime will easily be able to do this. A complete or near-complete separation of mosque and state seems far-fetched, but Iraq has always been a relatively secular state, and there is no reason why it should not return to its tradition. □