

## ŞADDĀM ĤUSAYN'S ROUTE TO THE TOP IN IRAQ, 1976 – 1980.\*

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One of the landmarks in the history of modern Iraq is the coup or revolution of 17–30 July 1968. The unfulfilled promises to establish a democratic and humane political system angered many Iraqis. A group of *ba'athist* officers led by Brigadier Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr (who had been prime minister of Iraq in the years 1963–1964) decided to topple the regime. They returned to power by accomplishing two coups, one on 17 July and the other on 30 July 1968. In both instances, they prevailed by stratagem rather than through force.<sup>1</sup> The victorious *Socialist Party of Arab Resurrection* (Ḥizb al-ba'ṯ al-arabī al-ishtirākī), commonly known as the *Ba'ṯ Party*, created a Revolutionary Command Council under the chairmanship of Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr. The RCC assumed unlimited power in the country and Şaddām Ḥusayn at-Tikrītī became its Vice Chairman.<sup>2</sup>

**Keywords:** The Ba'ṯ Party in power again; the oil boom; the Kurdish uprising and its collapse; the Agreement of Algiers; awkward position of the ICP; problems with the Shī'a; Şaddām's ruthless route to the top.

In Algiers, on 6 March 1975, at the OPEC conference the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran was concluded to stop “subversive infiltration” and both countries also agreed to end the border disputes between them.<sup>3</sup> Within a short time, Iran had withdrawn its heavy artillery and closed its borders, so the Kurds

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<sup>1</sup> BATATU, H. *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: a Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'ṯists and Free Officers*, p. 1073.

<sup>2</sup> ISKANDAR, A. *Şaddām Ḥusayn, munāḍilan wa mufakkiran wa insānan* [Şaddām Ḥusayn, the Fighter, the Thinker, and the Man], pp. 115–119.

<sup>3</sup> CHALIAND, G. Introduction. In CHALIAND, G. (ed.). *A People without a Country. The Kurds and Kurdistan*, p. 7.

could not regroup their forces or attack the Iraqis from Iranian territory and the Kurdish uprising collapsed.<sup>4</sup> Muṣṭafā al-Bārzanī felt he could not continue fighting without Iranian help and fled to Tehran. The armistice began on 13 March 1975 and a series of amnesties given to the Kurds, who fled to Iran, caused most of them to return to Iraq. Kurdish resistance collapsed; Muṣṭafā al-Bārzanī had to leave the country. He left in exile and died in 1979 in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The Algiers Agreement meant settling the Kurdish problem under Ba<sup>c</sup>th's terms, as well as resolving the border disputes that had dragged on since the 1930s and soured relations. The agreement restored the border between the two states in the tallweg of the Shaṭṭ al-<sup>c</sup>Arab River and evenly divided that waterway, whereas a previous agreement imposed by Iraq had stipulated that the border ran along Iran's riverbank, leaving Iran's use of water to Iraqi goodwill.<sup>6</sup> The agreement was drawn up under the direction of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, who, under the regime of Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr, was already the real power, because the immediate resolution of the Kurdish problem was a matter of survival for him. His flawed strategy forced him to make a humbling foreign policy concession. If he had followed the Manifesto of 11 March 1970, he could easily have averted the Kurdish insurgency. However, Ṣaddām Ḥusayn managed to turn the outrage into a political victory, which marked a reversal in the internal and regional policy of the Ba<sup>c</sup>th Party and made him the "strong man" in Baghdad.<sup>7</sup>

The Algiers Agreement meant the settlement of the Kurdish problem in Iraq under the terms of the Ba<sup>c</sup>th Party, as well as the adjustment of border disputes between Iran and Iraq that had dragged on since the 1930s and harmed mutual relations. Afterwards the Ba<sup>c</sup>th Party adopted against the Kurds an even harder position.

Muṣṭafā al-Bārzanī later confessed that he made his biggest mistake in believing that external forces, the US and Iran, would help him defeat the Iraqi regime, whereas they used him for their own ends. He did not realize the Iraqi army was already strong enough to defeat him in combat. The period 1968-1975 marked by the cruel defeat of the Kurds, was regrettably accompanied by

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<sup>4</sup> McDOWAL, D. *A Modern History of the Kurds*, pp. 338–339.

<sup>5</sup> CHALIAND, G. (ed.). *A People without a Country. The Kurds and Kurdistan*, p. 251. CARDRI (Committee Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq). *Saddam's Iraq. Revolution or Reaction*, p. 197.

<sup>6</sup> Text of the agreement in KHADDURI, M. *Socialist Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics since 1968*, p. 245–260.

<sup>7</sup> ABURISH, S. K. *Saddam Hussein. The Politics of Revenge*, p. 121.

massive transfers of the Kurdish population and brought to the Kurds a kind of autonomy, which was very far from a genuine one.<sup>8</sup>

The Ba'ath Party took even harder measures to prevent the resumption of Kurdish resistance. The strip of territory parallel to the state border with Iran was turned into a *cordon sanitaire*. Kurdish villages were removed from the area and their residents were taken to southern Iraq or settled in specially created villages surrounded by barbed wire with watchtowers.<sup>9</sup> The establishment of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in 1975, chaired by Jalāl aṭ-Ṭālabānī, marked a further internal division of the Kurds. It can be said that the Kurds in the northern part of Iraq formed the membership base of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, while in southern Iraq the Kurds were affiliated with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. In early 1977, the Kurds regrouped their forces and resumed guerrilla warfare.<sup>10</sup> Other opposition forces, including the Communists, began engaging in resistance activities in 1979.

Since 1975, the overall situation in Iraq had begun to change fundamentally. The first global factor, the oil boom, led to the increased self-confidence of the Ba'ath Party leaders, an effort to consolidate power and get rid of competitors. At the same time, Iraq sought to diversify its foreign policy and trade relations. The second global factor, which was the establishment of a communist regime in Afghanistan in April 1978, led to a rethink of the then foreign policy orientation towards the USSR and a fundamental change in Ba'athist attitude towards the Iraqi Communists. In connection with this, Iraq's socialist orientation also ended.<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet petroleum experts helped Iraq develop its industry independently of Western oil companies, and this gave the Iraqi government growing confidence to challenge the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). Iraq warned the IPC that it would end the ongoing negotiations if its demands were not met within a fortnight. They were not. So the government nationalized IPC on 1 June 1972, and became the first Arab country to take over a Western-owned oil corporation.<sup>12</sup> Having consolidated its acquisition of the IPC's assets, Iraq nationalised the American and Dutch interests in the Baṣra Petroleum Company operating in the south. It did so during the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, when

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<sup>8</sup> SLUGLETT, P. The Kurds. In CARDRI (Committee Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq). *Saddam's Iraq. Revolution or Reaction*, p. 197.

<sup>9</sup> McDOWAL, D. *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 339–340.

<sup>10</sup> JAWAD, Sa'ad. Recent Developments in the Kurdish Issue. In NIBLOCK, T. (ed.). *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, p. 58–59.

<sup>11</sup> GOMBÁR, E., PECHA, L. *Dějiny Iráku* [The History of Irāq], p. 496.

<sup>12</sup> SULAYMĀN, Hikmat Sāmī. *Naft al-'Irāq Dirāsa iqtisādīya siyāsīya* [Iraqi Oil. An Economic Political Study], p. 250.

feelings in the Arab world were running high against the USA and the Netherlands, which openly and materially sided with Israel.<sup>13</sup> The nationalisation of the IPC could hardly have taken place at a more opportune time.

Although Iraq's tentative attempts to dissociate itself from its leftist stance in the mid-1970s were welcomed by most of its neighbours, their continuing distrust and the regime's own unpredictable and erratic behaviour meant that the process of Iraq's reintegration into the "higher counsels" of Middle Eastern politics was somewhat uneven. However, the changing political circumstances in the region after 1973 produced an atmosphere that put growing pressure upon Iraq to put an end to its "radicalism" and to its strident extremism. Between 1972 and 1975 little development occurred in Iraq's relationship with the states of the Lower Gulf; it seems that the problems involving Iraq's relations with Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia exerted an influence on these states' relationship with Iraq. A further aspect of intra-Gulf relations was the suspicion harboured by the governments of the other states in the Gulf that Iraq was encouraging movements hostile to and subversive of the existing monarchical regimes.<sup>14</sup> In this situation the gradual weakening of ties with the Soviet Union, the new oil wealth, and the agreement concluded with Iran meant that Iraq was now in a better position to improve its relations with its neighbours and also play a more vigorous part in the politics of the region. Moscow helped to develop Iraq's petroleum industry in exploration and extraction as well as in refining. It was on this economic foundation, that in 1972 the USSR and Iraq signed a twenty-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation agreeing to develop cooperation in the strengthening of their defence capacity.<sup>15</sup>

The ending of the war in the north and the new warmth in relations with Iran allowed the government to concentrate on realising the potential of Iraq's massively increased oil revenues. The sudden huge rise in oil revenue which continued to grow at a fast rate from October 1973 had a beneficial effect on the economy.<sup>16</sup> By the end of 1975 Iraq's annual oil income stood at around \$8 billion and the government was quick to capitalise on the opportunities offered by this great increase in resources.<sup>17</sup> Sophisticated plans were put in hand to accommodate the building programme. However, Ṣaddām Ḥusayn soon realised

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<sup>13</sup> HIRO, D. *Iraq. A Report from the Inside*, p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> NIBLOCK, T. Iraqi Policies Towards the Arab States of the Gulf, 1958 – 1981. In NIBLOCK, T. (ed.). *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, pp. 143–144.

<sup>15</sup> HELMS, Ch. M. *Iraq. Eastern Flank of the Arab World*, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> WHITTLETON, C. Oil and the Iraqi Economy. In CARDRI. *Saddam's Iraq. Revolution or Reaction*, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> TRIPP, Ch. *A History of Iraq*, p. 214.

that his ambitions outstripped the public sector's ability to cope with them, so he began encouraging the private sector and facilitated its growth by creating agricultural, industrial and real estate banks.<sup>18</sup>

The consequences of the oil boom manifested themselves in economic life. At the end of 1975, the nationalization of Iraqi oil was completed by the nationalization of foreign shares in the Bašra Petroleum Company. Oil revenues increased significantly, so the state sector's share could increase also, with the oil sector of the economy making up the largest part. During this period Iraq experienced an unprecedented economic blossoming, and from a poor and backward Arab country it began to be considered a rich state.<sup>19</sup> The oil boom mainly benefitted the state and party bureaucracies. Oil revenue offered the president, his deputy (Şaddām Ḥusayn) and their associates the opportunity of creating a wide circle of dependants, deeply implicated in the regime's use of state funds to favour those whom it trusted and to create a client network of countrywide proportions. Much of this went to individuals who were already connected to the principal members of the regime, but Şaddām Ḥusayn in particular opened up opportunities to others whom he wished to draw into his own circle.<sup>20</sup>

The 1970s also saw Saudi Arabia emerge as an important power in Middle Eastern politics. The country was able to dictate the price of oil simply by threatening to flood the market from its massive reserves.<sup>21</sup> Other OPEC members just had to toe the line. The visit of Prince Fahd to Baghdad in June 1975 marked the beginning of improved relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and the two countries came to an agreement on the delimitation of the neutral zone on the borders between them. In a speech on the seventh anniversary of the Ba'th's coming to power, President Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr declared that Iraq had sought to deepen understanding with the Arab countries of the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, and to solve the problems pending with them. These manifestations of goodwill on the Iraqi side and expressions of enthusiasm on the part of Iraq's neighbours continued over the next few years, in spite of Saudi Arabia's commitment to Syria, Iraq's principal rival in the region.<sup>22</sup> In April 1976, in the course of a visit to Jidda, Şaddām Ḥusayn affirmed the need for joint action between Saudi Arabia and all the states of the

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<sup>18</sup> ABURISH, S. K. *Saddam Hussein. The Politics of Revenge*, p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> GOMBÁR, E. PECHA, L. *Dějiny Iráku* [The History of Irāq], p. 497.

<sup>20</sup> TRIPP, Ch. *A History of Iraq*, p. 215.

<sup>21</sup> DARWISH, A., ALEXANDER, G. *Unholy Babylon. The Secret History of Saddam's War*, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> SLUGLETT, M. F., SLUGLETT, P. *Iraq since 1958. From Revolution to Dictatorship*, p. 201.

Gulf, and in October 1977 a series of important joint technical and trade agreements was announced.<sup>23</sup>

In the second half of the 1970s, the dividing lines between the leadership of the *Ba'ath Party* and the state and its institutions were almost wiped out. At the same time, the remarkable growth in oil revenues during the 1970s also meant increasing the economic power of the party's leadership. Moreover, by "resolving" the Kurdish problem, the *Ba'ath Party* no longer needed the Communists and turned against them again. The 3rd Congress of the Iraqi Communist Party (al-Ḥizb ash-shuyū'ī al-'irāqī) was held in May 1976,<sup>24</sup> and soon after, in autumn 1976, low level harassment of individual Communists began again.<sup>25</sup> Despite official pronouncements to the contrary, tensions were increasingly visible between the ICP and the Iraqi government. If anything, Soviet attempts to heal the rift made it worse, since these efforts tended to be regarded by Ṣaddām Ḥusayn as unwarranted interference by the USSR in Iraq's affairs, deepening his already lively suspicions about the ICP.<sup>26</sup>

Iraq's oil income gave its leaders a freedom of choice which inevitably undermined the position of the USSR. However, regardless of that the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with the USSR remained in force as the Russians were still Iraq's major supplier of arms, as well as being involved in its oil and other industries.<sup>27</sup> In this atmosphere of vast government revenues, of ambitious development plans, of the encouragement and patronage of entrepreneurs in Iraq, it was scarcely surprising that Iraq's relations with Western states should have improved. Iraq had become an important market and, with the resolution of its problems with Iran, it was no longer seen as a strategic ally of the USSR. This led to renewed attention to the social security system, to new housing projects and impressive investments in health and education. During the next few years the effects of these well-resourced initiatives were felt throughout the country, greatly contributing to the feeling that the government was at last fulfilling its promises even if, at the same time, nearly 40 percent of the income from oil was being spent on arms purchases.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Arab Report and Record*, 3 October 1977.

<sup>24</sup> 'ABDALKARĪM, S. *Aḍwā' 'alā al-ḥaraka ash-shuyū'īya fī al-'Irāq* [Focused on the Communist Movement in Iraq], pp. 204–212.

<sup>25</sup> AL-KHALIL, S. *Republic of Fear. The Politics of Modern Iraq*, p. 233.

<sup>26</sup> SMOLANSKY, O. M., SMOLANSKY, B. M. *The USSR and Iraq: the Soviet quest for influence*, pp. 119–127.

<sup>27</sup> AḤMAD, Ibrāhīm Khalīl, ḤUMAJDĪ, Ja'far 'Abbās. *Tārīkh al-'Irāq al-mu'āšir* [Contemporary History of Iraq], p. 250.

<sup>28</sup> TRIPP, Ch. *A History of Iraq*, p. 214.

Şaddām Ḥusayn soon realized the importance of oil wealth and gradually strengthened his influence in the oil fields. Then in September 1977 he took overall control of the state's oil policy through the Committee for Oil Affairs and Agreements Execution.<sup>29</sup> Only he knew exactly the income and expense data, and on his directive a fixed portion of the oil revenues was transferred to foreign accounts. The Ba'ath Party set itself three main goals: 1. The elimination of an upper, and even middle, class of wealth and privilege and a more equal distribution of income and services; 2. The establishment of a socialist economy, with government ownership of national resources and means of production; 3. Diversification of the economy, allowing Iraq as much economic independence as possible.<sup>30</sup> Şaddām Ḥusayn in an interview stated that: "The government in our country is working for the establishment of socialism and is embarking on vital fields of socialist application. One of the important features of socialist construction is to provide every citizen with the opportunity of employment with a reasonable and defined income in accordance with the socialist concept and policy of answering the needs of the people on the basis of the conditions and character at each stage."<sup>31</sup>

In the event, the ICP was to be caught up like many others in the series of developments which were to propel Şaddām Ḥusayn into a position of undisputed leadership during the following few years.<sup>32</sup> By this stage, it was clear that he, rather than Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr, was the dominant figure in the regime. There was no obvious sign of competition between the two men and it would have been difficult to point to any real policy differences. However, Şaddām Ḥusayn had established an unchallenged hold on the state security apparatus and on the organisations of the party. This gave him an unparalleled grasp of the administration and from here he made inroads into the officer corps, establishing his own client networks amongst the Tikrītīs and others to whom he opened up the possibilities of enrichment and promotion if they adhered to his cause.<sup>33</sup>

In January 1976 Şaddām Ḥusayn signalled his ambitions by having Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr confer upon him the rank of Lieutenant General (al-farīq). He substantially expanded his own presidential guard, the Republican Guard, an elite unit founded back in 1963. The Republican Guard was gradually rebuilt into his personal instrument and was renamed the Popular Army (al-Jaysh ash-

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<sup>29</sup> STEVENS, P. Iraqi Oil Policy. In NIBLOCK, T. (ed.). *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> COUGHLIN, C. *Saddam. The Secret Life*, pp. 112–113.

<sup>31</sup> HUSSEIN, S. *Social and Foreign Affairs in Iraq*, p. 87.

<sup>32</sup> AL-KHALIL, S. *Republic of Fear. The Politics of Modern Iraq*, p. 231–232.

<sup>33</sup> TRIPP, Ch. *A History of Iraq*, p. 215–216.

sha<sup>c</sup>bī), commanded by his loyal companion Tāhā Yāsīn Ramaḍān al-Jazrāwī. This unit served exclusively by officers and soldiers from the city of Tikrīt, received the most advanced armaments.<sup>34</sup> The Guard continued to expand and its military capabilities increased during the war with Iran. Shortly afterwards it was announced, that the Popular Army was to be doubled in size, effectively deterring any other factions in the party from challenging Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's own leadership.<sup>35</sup>

In 1976 the Ba<sup>c</sup>th Party reportedly had 10,000 active members and half a million sympathizers. Ṣaddām Ḥusayn systematically strengthened his position and the Ba<sup>c</sup>thist ideology was gradually replaced by his cult of personality. Ṣaddām Ḥusayn figured increasingly in the publicity of the regime and criticism of him became highly dangerous. He underlined his control of the party by enlarging the Regional Command (al-Qiyāda al-quṭrīya) to twenty-one members in January 1977, rewarding his clients and diluting the influence of those who still had reservations about his ascendancy.<sup>36</sup> Through periodic purges in top party and state bodies, he systematically pushed aside or eliminated his actual as well as potential opponents.

Ṣaddām Ḥusayn wanted there to be no doubt about his own capacity to dominate the RCC and the government, forcefully showing that independent opposition such as that seen in the shī'ī cities would not be tolerated.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, these events allowed Ṣaddām Ḥusayn to put his imprint on relations with the shī'ī community as a whole. In September 1977, Ṣaddām Ḥusayn linked the Iraqi Ba<sup>c</sup>th Party's Regional Command to the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), which was in that way expanded to 22 members. He brought a number of shī'ī Iraqis to the RCC for the first time and this move indicated that he had resolved to act in the name of all sections of Iraqi society. Accompanying these symbolic moves were measures designed to underpin more concrete forms of power.

At the expense of President Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr, he had formed an inner circle of trusted supporters, both from his relatives and from party officials, even from non-Sunnī circles.<sup>38</sup> In September 1977 Ṣaddām Ḥusayn took control of all aspects of Iraq's oil policy, giving him unquestioned access to the key resource of the Iraqi state. He determined levels of production and controlled

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<sup>34</sup> KARSH, E., RAUTSI, I. *Saddām Husajn. Politická biografie* [Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. Political Biography], p. 197.

<sup>35</sup> HELMS, Ch. M. *Iraq. Eastern Flank of the Arab World*, p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> TRIPP, Ch. *A History of Iraq*, p. 216.

<sup>37</sup> FULLER, G. E., FRANCKE, R. R. *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>38</sup> GOMBÁR, E., PECHA, L. *Dějiny Iráku* [The History of Irāq], p. 497.



the disbursement of oil revenues. Only he knew the exact levels of income and expenditure. Therefore the data on the oil sector remained very sparse and without more information it was impossible to evaluate developments.<sup>39</sup> This was related to the high ambitions of some members of his clan. Among his prominent relatives was ʿAdnān Khayrallāh aṭ-Ṭalfāḥ, his stepbrother and brother-in-law who in October 1977 officially became Defence Minister and in April 1978 was promoted to general.<sup>40</sup> In that way the president, ʿAdnān's father-in-law, lost his influence in the army. Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's uncle and ʿAdnān's father, Khayrallāh aṭ-Ṭalfāḥ, was given the post of Mayor of Baghdad, where he became famous for unprecedented corruption.

The process of baʿthisation of the army was aimed at building an "ideological army" (al-Jaysh al-ʿaqāʾidī) with the force to protect its power. The "ideological army" advocated a national socialist ideology. It was the militant tool of the "leading Baʿth Party" to fulfil its aims and objectives. It was an organised and modern force capable of rapid and active movement and imbued with the overwhelming feeling of "historical responsibility". The officers had firm convictions about their elitist role as the leading "patriotic" force in Iraqi society.<sup>41</sup> Thus during the period between the Algiers Agreement in March 1975 and the outbreak of the war with Iran in September 1980 Iraqi foreign policy can be seen as a combination of fence-mending with potential allies and belligerency towards rivals, accompanied, almost as a logical corollary, by an equal mixture of extreme verbal militancy and profound practical caution on the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>42</sup>

Since then, the ailing president increasingly shunned political life, devoting himself to his family's privacy and working with roses in the garden. The management of the state affairs was clearly determined solely by Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. Internal political shifts led to a move from nationalist to chauvinistic and authoritarian tendencies, and a gradual transition from an authoritarian regime to a totalitarian dictatorship. Since the late 1960s, systematic baʿthisation of the society has been carried out: members of the state apparatus and university teachers could only operate if they became members of the party. This was followed by the persecution of all opponents, accompanied by imprisonment and torture.

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<sup>39</sup> STEVENS, P. Iraqi Oil Policy: 1961 – 1976. In NIBLOCK, T. (ed.). *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, p. 187.

<sup>40</sup> ABURISH, S. K. *Saddam Hussein. The Politics of Revenge*, p. 161.

<sup>41</sup> ABBAS, A. The Iraqi Armed Forces, Past and Present. In CARDRI. *Saddam's Iraq. Revolution or Reaction*, p. 216–217.

<sup>42</sup> SLUGLETT, M. F., SLUGLETT, P. *Iraq since 1958*, p. 201.

Iraq's rapid economic development, its increased economic ties with the West, and its growing distance from the USSR were all reflected, after 1975, in an increasingly moderate and pragmatic foreign policy. The shift was most noticeable in the Gulf, where relations improved with Iran, with Saudi Arabia and with the conservative Gulf shaykhdoms. In foreign policy there was a general change in orientation from the East to the West and trade with socialist countries declined significantly. Although arms deliveries from the USSR continued, its share of the market fell from 95% to 63%, when after September 1976 France, Italy, Brazil and other states became additional suppliers of arms and experts.<sup>43</sup>

An important internal political event was the clash of the Ba'ath Party with the Iraqi Communist Party, which was partly related to the establishment of a Communist regime in Afghanistan in April 1978. Already at the 3rd ICP congress in May 1976, dissatisfaction with the Ba'ath Party's policies was evident. The Ba'ath Party sought to limit Communist influence in mass organizations such as the Federation of Workers' Unions, the Federation of Democratic Youth, the General Union of Students, and the Union of Iraqi Women.<sup>44</sup> On 10 March 1978, the ICP issued a resolution proposing that 1978 be the last year of the "transitional period". The Progressive Patriotic and National Front (al-Jabha al-waṭaniya wa al-qawmiya at-taqaddumiya) gradually lost its importance. Over the next few years, hundreds of thousands of individuals who, for whatever reason, opposed the Ba'ath Party were imprisoned, murdered or forced to emigrate.<sup>45</sup> A bitter campaign was launched, and on 7 June 1978, 21 Iraqi communists were executed for alleged activity in the army and the ICP went underground. In April 1979, the government banned the newspaper *Ṭarīq ash-Sha'b*.<sup>46</sup> The Progressive National Patriotic Front, although it was never officially dissolved, did not convene again and was effectively shut down.<sup>47</sup>

The situation in the Arab world was greatly altered after the Egyptian President Anwar as-Sādāt visited Jerusalem in November 1977. This event marked a major departure from the previous norms of inter-Arab politics and

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<sup>43</sup> ABURISH, S. K. *Saddam Hussein. The Politics of Revenge*, p. 131.

<sup>44</sup> AL-SHARQI, A. The Emancipation of Iraqi Women. In NIBLOCK, T. (ed.). *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, p. 85.

<sup>45</sup> SORBY, K. R., SORBY, Karol Jr. *Blízky východ v medzinárodnej politike, 1971 – 1990* [The Middle East in International Policy], pp. 138–139.

<sup>46</sup> ZAHER, U. Political Development in Iraq 1963 – 1980. In CARDRI. *Saddam's Iraq. Revolution or Reaction*, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> GOMBÁR, E., PECHA, L., *Dějiny Iráku* [The History of Irāq], pp. 498–499.

required a fundamental change in the ground rules.<sup>48</sup> Iraq hastened to condemn the Egyptian president and cut its diplomatic ties with Egypt. Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr and Ṣaddām Ḥusayn used the opportunity to urge even more radical action upon the Arab world than even the 1978 Tripoli summit of so-called steadfastness or rejectionist states were willing to contemplate. However, their failure to rally much support for their position led to a decided change in tactics.

The Camp David Agreement between Egypt and Israel of 17 September 1978 had provided President Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr with the real or nominal reason to use this long-awaited opportunity to curb or remove Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. All Arabs, including the leadership of both branches of the Ba'ath Party, were agreed that the response to Egyptian peace initiative had to include a strengthening of the Arab Eastern front, opposing Israel with namely Iraq, Syria and Jordan.<sup>49</sup> On 1 October 1978 Iraq announced that it was willing to send troops to reinforce Syria in its confrontation with Israel. This pledge was made by Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr who, acting on his own and courageously, followed it up with an open-ended offer to merge his country with its erstwhile enemy. For Syrian President Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad the removal of Egypt from any possible military alliance against Israel left Syria dangerously exposed, so there was no way that he could refuse such an offer. Iraq and its resources consequently held out the hope of restoring some form of strategic balance, and using unification rhetoric was a small price to pay for the cementing of a strategic alliance.<sup>50</sup>

More than any other factor, Camp David propelled Iraq into the mainstream of Arab politics. Iraq had demonstrated its opposition to the Egyptian-Israeli agreements and Ṣaddām Ḥusayn wanted to use Egypt's isolation to demonstrate Iraq's leadership in the Arab world. This was to be served by the Conference of Arab Heads of State. In November 1978, the Iraqi regime took the initiative in organizing in Baghdad, from 2 to 5 November 1978,<sup>51</sup> an all-Arab summit (except for the Egyptian government) to counteract the Camp David agreement. Again, Iraq was forced to moderate its tone on the Palestinian question, ending its support for the extreme faction of the Palestinian movement led by Abū Niḍāl and restoring relations with Jāsir 'Arafāt and the mainstream PLO.<sup>52</sup> The summit which had condemned Anwar as-Sādāt had also agreed in principle on a number of punitive steps should he refuse to reject the Camp David

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<sup>48</sup> SLUGLETT, M. F., SLUGLETT, P. *Iraq since 1958*, pp. 202–203.

<sup>49</sup> ABURISH, S. K. *Saddam Hussein. The Politics of Revenge*, pp. 164–165.

<sup>50</sup> TRIPP, Ch. *A History of Iraq*, p. 219.

<sup>51</sup> COUGHLIN, C. *Saddam. The Secret Life*, pp. 112–113.

<sup>52</sup> MARR, Ph. *The Modern History of Iraq*, p. 244.

agreements.<sup>53</sup> Baghdad's second meeting of Foreign Ministers on 19 March 1979 signalled the exclusion of Egypt from the Arab League and the relocation of the headquarters of this interstate organization from Cairo to Tunis.<sup>54</sup>

After the Iraqi leadership had begun to adopt a more consistent policy in response to Anwar as-Sādāt's visit to Jerusalem, it managed to obtain a large measure of support from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, which continued until and beyond the brief and ultimately fruitless period of Iraqi-Syrian amity between October 1978 and July 1979. The president had tried to strengthen his position by spectacularly ending hostilities to Syria. On 26 October 1978, following the Iraqi president's meeting with the Syrian president in Baghdad, the joint Charter of National Action was signed, declaring the intention to "implement deep unionist relations between the Arab regions of Iraq and Syria". The statement at the conclusion of the second session of the Joint Syrian-Iraqi Political Committee of 30 January 1979 spoke of the constitutional unity of the two regions. Inevitably, a strategic alliance between two Ba'athist regimes raised the question of the union of the two states. This was dangerous for the power position of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, as only Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr and Ḥāfīz al-Asad were expected to lead the new state. The third meeting in June 1979 marked "the funeral feast of the whole project".<sup>55</sup>

It is worth mentioning that neither Ḥāfīz al-Asad nor Ṣaddām Ḥusayn had any intention of pursuing unification seriously, but it served their purposes to be seen to be preparing the way in the autumn of 1978.<sup>56</sup>

In the wake of the summit, Iraq even attempted briefly to patch up its long-standing feud with Syria. The summit did not actually improve relations with Syria, but it bore fruit in Jordan. In June 1979 Ṣaddām Ḥusayn paid a visit to Jordan, the first Iraqi head of state to do so since 1958, and a wide variety of agreements – military, economic, and political – were made. By 1980, work had begun on a number of joint projects. Chief among them were the expansion of the port of Aqaba, which the Iraqis hoped to use to relieve their own Gulf ports and as a potential replacement for those in Lebanon and Syria, and the improvement of the road system between Amman and Baghdad.<sup>57</sup> After opening the pipeline from Kirkūk to the port of Fao, Ṣaddām Ḥusayn found a tool to pressure Syria by no longer depending on the pipeline through Syrian territory.

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<sup>53</sup> MAṬAR, Fu'ād. *Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, ar-rajul wa al-qaḍīya wa al-mustaqbal* [Ṣaddām Ḥusayn, the Man, the Cause and the Future], pp. 85–86.

<sup>54</sup> GOMBÁR, E., PECHA, L. *Dějiny Iráku* [The History of Irāq], p. 498.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> KIENLE, E. *Ba'ath versus Ba'ath: The Conflict between Syria and Iraq, 1968 – 1989*, pp. 207–213.

<sup>57</sup> MARR, Ph. *The Modern History of Iraq*, p. 245.

The solution came on 16 July 1979, when, on the eve of the 11th anniversary of the revolution, the president announced his resignation on television and demanded that he be relieved of all positions for “health reasons.” The forced resignation of the president, whom Khayrallāh at-Ṭalfāḥ and his son ʿAdnān urged to “step down in the interest of the tribe”, led to the rise of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn to power.<sup>58</sup> This decision was taken on 11 July 1979 at a secret meeting of the RCC, where the 65-year-old Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr appointed Ṣaddām Ḥusayn as his successor saying: “During the Revolutionary March, he was a great leader, able to face all difficulties and bear the burden of responsibility”.<sup>59</sup> Ṣaddām Ḥusayn modestly agreed to keep “unity in the party”. Many Bathists were convinced that what took place in Baghdad in July 1979 was a coup within the party.<sup>60</sup> Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Bakr died in seclusion on 4 October 1982. Possible internal opposition in the *Baʿth Party* to the upcoming changes was avoided shortly before the “conspiracy” planned by Syria to overthrow the regime was revealed. A special party tribunal was set up under the presidency of Naʿīm Ḥaddād and sentenced to death five RCC members and 17 other party members.<sup>61</sup> The fact that even those who were so close to the leader before could fall so suddenly and fatally into disfavour showed that no opposition, whether inside or outside the party, would be tolerated.<sup>62</sup>

The Shīʿī political movement in Iraq emerged after the fall of the monarchy. Several religious leaders, scholars (ʿulamāʾ) in an-Najaf, led by āyatallāh Muḥammad Bākīr aṣ-Ṣadr, dissatisfied with the way the Shīʿī community was supporting the Communists, formed in autumn 1958 a political organization called the Association of Scholars of an-Najaf (*Jamʿīyat al-ʿulamāʾ fī an-Najaf al-Ashraf*).<sup>63</sup> It aimed to raise consciousness of the Muslim community as a whole and to stop the spread of communism and atheism. In their work, these scholars sought to disprove Marxism and criticised western economic and social thinking and philosophy.<sup>64</sup>

In the late 1960s, communism was no longer the main concern of scholars, but the *Baʿth Party* itself and the Association of Scholars of an-Najaf were reshaped into a political party called the Islamic Call (*ad-Daʿwa al-islāmīya*).<sup>65</sup>

<sup>58</sup> COUGHLIN, C. *Saddam. The Secret Life*, p. 154.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in GOMBÁR, E., PECHA, L. *Dějiny Iráku* [The History of Irāq], p. 499.

<sup>60</sup> ABURISH, S. K. *Saddam Hussein. The Politics of Revenge*, p. 169.

<sup>61</sup> COUGHLIN, C. *Saddam. The Secret Life*, pp. 160–161

<sup>62</sup> SLUGLETT, M. F., SLUGLETT, P. *Iraq since 1958*, p. 209.

<sup>63</sup> DZIEKAN, M. M. *Irak. Religia i politika* [Irāq. Religion and Politics], p. 71.

<sup>64</sup> NAKASH, Y. *The Shiʿis of Iraq*, p. 137.

<sup>65</sup> KARSH, E., RAUTSI, I. *Saddām Husajn. Politická biografie* [Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. Political Biography], p. 148.

The establishment of this party was partly a response to the secular nature of the ba<sup>ʿ</sup>thist state, but mainly to the new decision of the state to directly interfere in the affairs of the Shī<sup>ʿ</sup>ī religious hierarchy, which was a sensitive area, from which all previous Iraqī governments had kept their distance, including the Ottomans until the end of the First World War. The *Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>th Party* responded to the activities of the Islamic Call in the usual way: in 1974, five scholars were executed by the *Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>th Party* without trial; In February 1977, a wave of arrests took place in sacred cities during religious ceremonies, after which eight members of the clergy were executed and 15 were sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>66</sup> In the autumn of 1978, at the request of the Shah, Baghdad had to expel from Iraq āyatallāh Rūḥallāh Khumaynī (Khomeini), who had spent the previous 15 years as an exile in the sacred city of an-Najaf in Iraq.<sup>67</sup> In 1979, encouraged by the Iranian revolution, the Islamic Call came into open conflict with the government, attacking Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>th party offices and police stations and openly expressing its support for the new government in Iran.

The *Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>th Party* responded with an intense campaign against the Islamic Call and membership was punishable by death. In April 1980, ājatallāh Muḥammad Bākīr aṣ-Ṣadr and his sister Bint Hudā were executed.<sup>68</sup> A few months later, the Iraqī army invaded Iran, resulting in the transfer of the Syrian opposition to the regime to another level, so that its opposition stance could be described as an attack on Iraq and Arabism, which was tantamount to treason. It is difficult to estimate the effect that *Islamic Call*'s attitudes had but, although most of the recruits were Shī<sup>ʿ</sup>īs, there could be no talk of mass desertion or expressions of solidarity between Iraqī and Iranian Shī<sup>ʿ</sup>īs. Unlike the Kurds, who constituted a distinct ethnic and national group, the large majority of Iraqī Shī<sup>ʿ</sup>īs were Arabs and their primary identity came to be Iraqī. Although at times they flaunted their sectarian identity, the Iraqī Shī<sup>ʿ</sup>īs did not go so far as to advocate self-rule.<sup>69</sup> And so, although the reprisals effectively prevented a renewal in the activities of the *Islamic Call*, they made many Shī<sup>ʿ</sup>īs more aware of their religious affiliation than before.

The consolidation of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn's power was accompanied by increased activity on the part of the Iraqī secret services. In addition to the General Secret Service (al-Mukhābarāt), there was the Special Security Service

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<sup>66</sup> ZAHER, U. *The Oppositor*. In CARDRI (Committee Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq). *Saddam's Iraq. Revolution or Reaction*, pp. 165–166.

<sup>67</sup> KARSH, E., RAUTSI, I. *Saddām Husajn. Politická biografie* [Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. Political Biography], pp. 150–151.

<sup>68</sup> KARSH, E., RAUTSI, I. *Saddām Husajn. Politická biografie* [Ṣaddām Ḥusayn. Political Biography], p. 152.

<sup>69</sup> NAKASH, Y. *The Shi<sup>ʿ</sup>is of Iraq*, p. 138.

(al-Amn al-khāṣṣ), which was directly subject to the president's office and was estimated to have nearly 58 thousand men.<sup>70</sup>

In March 1980, the President made another major change to the constitutional order when he restored the powers of parliament, the National Assembly, whose activities had been suspended after the 1958 revolution. Under the new law, parliament was supposed to have 250 MPs to be elected by secret ballot every four years. Parliament was supposed to give the impression abroad that Iraq was embarking on a path of democratic development, but the practice was completely different. All candidates for MPs were selected according to strict conditions: they had to subscribe to the principles of the Revolution of July 1968, so the National Assembly was a parade of selected Ba'ath Party members.<sup>71</sup> As a result, the highest executive and legislative power in the state embodied the RCC.

The country's oil wealth allowed Ṣaddām Ḥusayn to equip his multiple parallel secret services with sophisticated means of surveillance and control. Together with the expansion of the communication system, these security services made the state machine more effective than ever. During the 1980s, security was further strengthened by building large underground complexes, designed and built mostly by British firms, to serve as emergency headquarters in the event of an attack on the regime.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 had a profound effect on Iraqi politics, as it marked the end of friendly relations between the two countries, which had lasted since 1975. In particular, the fall of shah meant the de facto annulment of the Algerian Agreement and the resurgence of the Kurdish problem. Moreover, the creation of a Shī'ī theocratic government in Iran caused serious concern to the government in Iraq, where, as elsewhere in the Arab world, the return to Islam filled the vacuum caused by the ideological retreat of Arab nationalism and socialism. Ṣaddām Ḥusayn underestimated the enthusiasm latent in the Iranian Revolution, misjudged the nature of its effect on the morale and combative nature of the Iranian armed forces, revived the old border disputes between the two countries in the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab River and the status of the south-western Iranian province Khūzistān/Arabistān and on 22 September 1980, he made frequent cross-border armed incidents (the shelling of Baṣra by Iranian artillery) into a pretext for unleashing war on Iran. War was his last resort after trying all remaining means to avert Iranian pressure. The decision of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn to enter the war did not come easily, or with enthusiasm. He was essentially manoeuvred into it by growing fears of jeopardizing his own political survival. It was a pre-emptive step that should have been a temporary

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<sup>70</sup> Al-KHALIL, S. *Republic of Faear. The Politics of Modern Iraq*, p. 37.

<sup>71</sup> COUGHLIN, C. *Saddam. The Secret Life*, p. 166.

opportunity to avert the Iranian threat to his regime, and the Iraqi people were thus used as a shield to protect his political future. However, Iraq's leadership was not able to realistically assess the strategic situation, because even though the Iranian army was in chaos after the revolution, the basic demographic and geographical facts were clear: the size and population of Iran was three times that of Iraq.

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