

Baathism Caused the Chaos in Iraq and Syria. BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

The United States invaded the Levant 15 years ago – but the region’s scorched-earth ideology has kept the fire burning.



A burning mural of Saddam Hussein in Kirkuk on April 11, 2003. (Patrick Barth/Getty Images)

The United States intervened militarily in Iraq in 2003, 15 years ago this month, and the result was war and chaos. But the United States did not intervene in Syria in 2011 when the regime there was challenged, and the result was still war and chaos. Though the media has interpreted the past decade and a half of armed conflict in the Levant exclusively through the failure of U.S. policy, the fact that the policy in Syria was 180-degrees different from the one in Iraq and yet the result was the same indicates that there has to be a deeper, more fundamental force at work in both countries that journalists and historians must acknowledge.

That deeper force is the legacy of Baathism. A toxic mix of secular Arab nationalism and Eastern Bloc-style socialism that dominated Syria and Iraq for decades since the 1960s, it made the regimes of the al-Assad family in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq completely unique in the Arab world. Baathism, more than George W. Bush or Barack Obama, is the father of the violent Hobbesian nightmare that has devastated the lands between the Mediterranean Sea and the Iranian plateau in the early 21st century.

As a rule, the more abstract and totalizing the ideology, the more blood that follows in its wake. That's because once a leader is toppled or challenged, such ideologies provide for no intermediary layers of civil society — between the regime at the top and the tribe and extended family at the bottom — to hold a country together. In 1998 in Beirut, three years before 9/11, I interviewed the public intellectual Elias Khoury who told me regarding Iraq and Syria, “these regimes have succeeded in destroying not only their societies but any alternatives to themselves. Because no alternative can survive, the choice may be between total control and total chaos.”

Khoury's clairvoyance rested on the knowledge that Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein had used their many decades in power to build elaborate *moukhabarat* (security service) structures that only masqueraded as states. Their people remained subjects, not citizens; and ethnic and sectarian contradictions lay bottled-up, ready to explode, rather than be assuaged by healthy economic and political development. Beneath the carapaces of tyranny lay utter voids.

At the root of this complete failure to forge vibrant, secular identities spanning ethnic and sectarian lines in Syria and Iraq was Baathist ideology, something far more lethal and suffocating than what obtained in the basically ordinary, bourgeois tyrannies of Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere in the Arab world. Places like Egypt and Tunisia constitute age-old clusters of civilization, which have been states in one form or another since antiquity, and with robust identities to go with it; whereas Iraq and Syria were merely vague geographical expressions, with much weaker histories as states, and thus they required more extreme forms of brutality to hold them together. And in that effort, Baathism supplied the ideological adhesive.

Baathism was hammered out before and during World War II by two members of the Damascene middle class, one Christian and the other Muslim: Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar, who were attracted to the heady ideologies swirling around Europe that they had picked up as students in France in the early 1930s. What emerged was a concoction of Arab nationalism, the Marxism that both Aflaq and Bitar had become enamored with, and German theories of an idealized blood-and-soil identity that were prevalent among the Nazis at the time. What the French scholar Olivier Roy writes about the half-educated Islamic fundamentalists of today applies as well to the secular Baathists: Because their own societies had ignored these bookish sons of the lower and middle classes, they resented their own status and dreamt of a revolution that would wipe away the Arab bourgeoisie altogether, in return for heavily mobilized, overly centralized states with a proletarian mindset. And by the early 1960s, it was people such as Aflaq and Bitar, not the members of the traditional merchant classes in Damascus and Baghdad — nor the Ottoman- and European mandate-era elites with their easygoing notions of governance — who gained the ears of

rising military officers and activists like the elder Assad and Saddam Hussein.

Alas, the consequence of Baathism's steamy and abstract ideas, whose intellectual meaning began to evaporate once they directly encountered the largely illiterate and traditional societies of the Levant, was merely sterile police states built on repression, some economic development, and the manipulation of sect and clan. While in Iraq, under Sunni rule, Baathism evolved eventually into an anti-Shiite philosophy, in Syria under Alawite rule it became in effect anti-Sunni; it was anti-Kurd in both countries, whatever its stated pretensions. Baathism was in practice an intensified-disease variant of Arab nationalism, which itself would be later overwhelmed by the forces of Islamist radicalism.

Of course, within Baathism there were always regional differences. Iraq under Saddam, where people didn't even dare whisper about the regime in their homes, was far more repressive than Syria under the elder Assad, where dissent was allowed, as long as it was never public. As a journalist from the 1970s to the 1990s, I periodically visited Syria and traveled the country by bus, meeting people everywhere, without need of an escort.

But in Iraq, following a day trip from Baghdad south to Najaf in 1984, I was warned in the strongest terms never to attempt that again, and when I did travel in northern Iraq two years later I could do so only with an escort, after my passport had been temporarily taken from me by the regime authorities. In Iraq in the 1980s, I had to hand my news copy to an official behind a thick glass window, who would punch it out on a telex machine to my editors. In Syria I could go into any post office and send out my copy unsupervised.

Iraq was like a vast prison yard lit up by high-wattage lamps. To wit, Saddam required Iraqi society to be always on a war footing. After fighting Iran for a decade in the 1980s, he invaded Kuwait in 1990. That invasion would in a pathological sense constitute the beginning of the bloody finale of Baathism, invented at the Sorbonne six decades earlier.

And that is why I am uncertain that the Iraqi Baathists would have survived the Arab spring of 2011 unscathed had the United States left Saddam in power 15 years ago this month. Because sectarian and ethnic lines among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds were always more sharply drawn in Iraq than even in Syria, and because of the particular intensity and bestiality of Saddam's regime, the slightest puncture in the ruling facade (given ongoing sanctions and further destruction of the economy) would have shattered the whole state structure quicker than in Syria.

It is certainly true that the concept of “resistance” is central to Baathism, and so Saddam would have fought on, no matter the odds, and might well have survived in some nominal form — but not without a vast loss of life and a comparable weakening of the state. Thus, clerical Iran would still have emerged as dominant in Mesopotamia, even without an American invasion. For a respite in this situation, we will have to await an internal upheaval inside Iran itself. There is little the United States can do on its own to salvage it.

The expansion of Iranian influence to the Mediterranean that has followed in the past 15 years is as much a consequence of the corrosive societal effect of Baathism as of the decisions of U.S. presidents. Iraq’s only hope after the American invasion was for the quick emergence, or installment, of another military dictator, this time along the lines of a Hosni Mubarak like in Egypt or a Pervez Musharraf like in Pakistan, Westernized pragmatists far less brutal than Saddam. But given how Saddam and Baathist ideology had so deformed Iraqi society, even that possibility would have been a long shot.

The damage that Baathist ideology did to Syria, though milder than in Iraq, was still sufficiently severe that chaos ensued once the regime was critically challenged. After 21 changes of government in its first 24 years of independence, a coup brought the elder Assad to power in 1970. Soviet-bloc security advisors, with their torture and surveillance techniques, helped achieve stability, but Assad did nothing with it. Rather than convert subjects to citizens and build a sense of a patria to unite all the country’s many disparate groups — Sunni, Shiite, Kurd, Armenian, Arab Christian — he merely resorted to sterile repression (albeit a lighter form than Saddam’s).

What Syria required back then was enlightened dictatorship, something akin to what Habib Bourguiba was offering in Tunisia and the kings in Morocco and Jordan were offering in their own countries. But because of his own minority status as an Alawite, Assad was too insecure for that. Alas, Baathism, its ideological pretensions notwithstanding, lacked the inherent perceived legitimacy of Arab monarchies which were thus able to provide their peoples with a sufficient dose of freedom — freedom which, in turn, allowed for a measure of civil society that the Baathist regimes lacked. Syria, thus, came apart when the regime of Assad’s son faced serious protests. Could the United States have stopped the carnage had it intervened soon after 2011? That remains an unknowable.

None of this is an attempt to escape the consequences of the Iraq invasion, which I supported. The Iraq War was clearly not worth the cost of 4,500 or so American dead and tens of thousands of seriously wounded — casualties that have devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands of loved ones in the United States, to say nothing of the far more numerous Iraqi dead. And yet my support for the war arose from my vivid personal experiences of

repression in Saddam's Iraq in the 1980s, which I could only compare to Romania under Nicolae Ceausescu, where I had also worked during that decade, and whose regime also constituted a toxic brew of socialism and national fascism. If Romania could recover following Ceausescu, I believed that Iraq somehow could, too. I should have remembered better after 9/11 what Khoury had told me.

Khoury had emphasized that Baathist rule was so total that it created no alternative to itself, so that Baathists were needed, at least at the lower levels, to run Iraq after Saddam was toppled. This was something the occupation authorities should have realized, just as Western and Soviet occupiers understood they would have to forgive lower-level Nazis in order to run Germany after Hitler was toppled. Of course, this lesson was forgotten in Iraq.

But it might yet be applied in Syria, where the functionaries now manning Bashar al-Assad's regime would have to continue in their jobs, even in the unlikely possibility that the younger Assad is ever removed. For if Assad is ever toppled, Damascus — still at peace, more-or-less — could turn into a writhing, bloody charnel house just like Aleppo, Mosul, and Baghdad became following the collapse of Baathist rule in those cities. Whatever the West does in Syria, we better have a detailed plan in advance for what comes afterward. Remember that Romania recovered with only a few days of anarchy after Ceausescu fell only because a more moderate wing of the Communist Party effectively took power in a transition phase lasting several years before real democracy would emerge there.

America's mistakes in Iraq and perhaps in Syria have been legion, but at the same time we should also realize that the United States, whether at its best, or at its worst like in Iraq, is not omnipotent. For example, a political transformation of even a subtle kind inside Iran, the regional hegemon, will have a greater impact on the region than anything America has done or will do. In the same spirit, it was Baathism, first and foremost, that provided the political and social foundation for Iraqi and Syrian anarchy, not our action or inaction. Of course, the very consequences of how Baathism had left a complete abyss underneath the facade of Saddam's tyranny should have been foremost in Americans' minds before we invaded.

But it was the triumphalism resulting from U.S. victories over the other totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century — over Nazism in 1945 and communism in 1989 — that lay at the root of its hubris in Iraq in 2003. For if American intervention could heal Nazi Germany after 1945 and dramatically improve formerly communist Yugoslavia in the 1990s, nothing was off-limits, or so it seemed. Thus, the dissolution of Iraq was a culmination of sorts: It revealed the utter emptiness of Baathist ideology on the one hand and the end of American imperial-like, unipolar dominance on

the other. And as Iraq crumbled into bloody mayhem in the years following the U.S. invasion, the 20th century in the true historical sense finally came to an end.

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