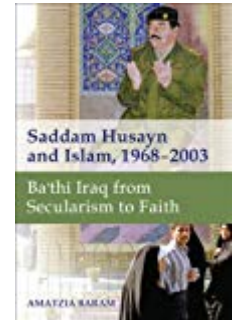**Amatzia Baram.** *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003: Ba`thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith.* Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 495 pp. $59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-1582-6.

Reviewed by David Palkki

Amatzia Baram, a distinguished historian of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, provides novel insights regarding Saddam Hussein's use of Islam in this intelligent new study.[1] Saddam, the author argues, gave up on the original Ba'athist vision of a secular society after the disastrous war with America in 1991 and after realizing, following the ensuing Shia uprising, that the regime's previous approach had failed to garner sufficient Shia support. Initially, he writes, Saddam's use of Islam was more instrumental than sincere. With the passage of time, however, Saddam became a "'born-again' Muslim of sorts" (p. 329).

The author is a master storyteller. The book, though lengthy and scholarly, is a page-turner. Who knew that Saddam wrote a letter to God in 2002? And that this letter was to be placed inside a wall in the famous umm al-Ma'arik mosque, alongside a few hairs from Saddam's mustache, as supplication to God to protect the mustache hairs and Iraq? Baram writes that this letter constitutes "the most telling evidence" that Saddam became "a believer of sorts" (p. 337). Whatever one makes of this unusual letter, it is by no means the only evidence buttressing the author's argument about Saddam's increasing religiosity. Baram's evidence comes largely from captured Iraqi records previously accessible to scholars at the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC), before the CRRC shut down due to lack of continued governmental funding.[2]

One of the most important contributions of Baram's book may be his contrast of Saddam's approach to mosque-state relations with that of other leaders--and of other authors. Joseph Sasoon writes in his groundbreaking study of the Ba'ath Party that Saddam and his subordinates pushed Islam publicly with their Faith Campaign, yet, "behind the scenes, continued to be antireligious and to repress any signs of religiosity."[3] Baram disagrees. To the contrary, he argues, Saddam was hostile toward and repressive of individuals and institutions that bucked the approved religious line, yet in being so differed little from Ayatollah Khomeini, Umar al-Bashir, and Saudi leaders. Saddam's version of Islam was an unusual one, he ac-

knowledges, while stressing that Saddam tended to implement (albeit not fully) the five pillars of Islam. Despite the idiosyncrasies in Saddam's interpretations, Baram questions, who is to say that one version of Islam is more legitimate than another? Is this not merely in the eye of the beholder? One might argue that Saddam "Ba'athized" Islam by excising its shar'i contents, he writes, but this can only be correct if one accepts "true" Islam as defined exclusively by the Wahhabis, Sayyid Qutb, or other Salafi extremists. Baram pushes research on the question of Saddam's religiosity forward, though we have certainly not heard the end of this debate.

Baram's suggestions that Saddam is responsible for ISIS have attracted more attention, and some criticism.[4] Baram has been quoted in *Politico* as saying that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State (ISIS), "is Saddam's creation."[5] ISIS, he suggested to listeners at a Woodrow Wilson Center launch of his book, was nothing other than "Saddam's dead hand, thrusting out of his grave in Tikrit."[6] By working to desecularize the Ba'ath Party, turning Iraq into an increasingly religious society, and pursuing policies that had the unintended effect of hardening sectarian identities while empowering local junior and mid-level clerics, the argument goes, Saddam paved the way for ISIS (pp. 315-16, 328, and 346-48). The close collaboration between Islamists and former Ba'athists should not be terribly surprising, it follows, since Saddam's regime had been inadvertently paving the way for such an outcome over many years through its policies.

Various analysts have parroted these claims. Sometimes they give Baram credit, but, in other instances they present his arguments and evidence as if they were their own.[7] Given the emphasis paid to the question of whether Saddam's Faith Campaign caused ISIS, readers might be surprised to find only three pages in the book's section on "The Effect of the Faith Campaign on Post-Ba'thi Iraq" (pp. 346-48). What is more, in the book itself we see no mention of ISIS being "Saddam's creation" or talk of Saddam's dead hand pushing ISIS out of his grave. The claims in the book are much more nuanced. Opponents of the 2003 invasion of Iraq have long blamed George W. Bush for implementing policies that led to sectarian violence in Iraq, and, eventually, to ISIS. Now there is a rejoinder: it was not Bush who made ISIS possible, but Saddam. Neither explanation is entirely persuasive since no single factor can adequately account for the group's rise. But while it is unreasonable to expect either of these explanations to suffice, at least not on their own, in this reviewer's assessment Baram might be on to something. It is not at all unreasonable to suggest that greatly intensified mosque building and Islamization efforts during the latter portion of Saddam's rule had something to do with what came thereafter, including ISIS successes in seizing and holding territory.

Hopefully Baram and other analysts will use this excellent study as a springboard from which to more thoroughly address, and debate, the longer-term effects of the Faith Campaign. The captured Iraqi records at the Hoover Institution, and, perhaps also the University of Colorado archives, will help. If the CRRC comes back to life, or its records are otherwise again made available to scholars, these will also play a vital role in resolving this debate. Understanding ISIS is of terrible importance to policymakers and intelligence analysts, though one would not know it from the bureaucratic myopia that forced the CRRC to close its doors for lack of funding.[8] This book is essential reading for scholars of modern Iraqi history and of Islam and politics.

Notes

[1]. This review reflects the views of the author and not necessarily those of the Air War College, the US Department of Defense, or any other entity.

[2]. Michael R. Gordon, "Archive of Captured Enemy Documents Closes," *New York Times*, June 21, 2015.

[3]. Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

[4]. For criticism, see Samuel Helfont and Michael Brill, "Saddam's ISIS?", January 12, 2016, www.foreignaffairs.com.

[5]. Mark Perry, "Fighting Saddam All Over Again," *Politico*, April 28, 2015.

[6]. For a Wilson Center invitation to this event that also uses this particular phrase, see https://dc.linktank.com/event/saddam-husayn-and-islam-ba-thi-iraq-1968-2003-from-secularism-and-faith.

[7]. See, for instance, Kyle W. Orton, "How Saddam Hussein Gave Us ISIS," *New York Times*, December 23, 2015. Orton, a blogger, gives Baram credit for two sentences in this *New York Times* article, but this is greatly inadequate since the entire article is merely an overview of Baram's research findings.

[8]. Gordon, "Archive of Captured Enemy Documents Closes."

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

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