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ROUNDTABLE: IRAQ TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE US INVASION

State and Religion in Iraq: The Sufi Insurgency of the Former Baʿth Regime in Historical Context

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Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iraqi society has experienced profound crises in its transition from a strong centralized state under secular Baʿth Party authoritarianism to a new weak but still authoritarian federal state that is dominated by Shiʿi Islamist parties and plagued by factionalism, open sectarian competition, and conflict. A comprehensive scrutiny of the country's recent historical ruptures and continuities that pertain to the relations between the state and religion in particular is still a desideratum in contemporary Iraq studies. The extent to which thirty-five years of Baʿthi dictatorship transformed and lastingly shaped Iraq's diverse religious landscape is still not yet fully understood. Following the US-led invasion, the former regime was well-remembered for its repression and atrocities against almost all segments of society, but its image and the long-held notion and memory of it as "atheist" and "antireligious" are increasingly being challenged. Moreover, sectarian conflicts and violence since 2005 reveal an ongoing conflict over the interpretive sovereignty and ownership of famous religious sites of memory, such as shrines and mosques, between the various factions in Iraq.[1] Beginning with the Iran–Iraq War in 1980, the Baʿth regime lavishly sponsored Sunni and Shiʿi shrines and advertised them in its religious war propaganda all over the country as sites of memory for the Iraqi and Arab nation. Many of these religious sites were surrounded by a certain confessional ambiguity and constitute memorials and meeting places for Sunnis and Shiʿis equally. After the fall of the regime, this ambiguity sparked sectarian competition over these sites since both communities often associated with one and the same shrine quite different memories of the same saintly figure, or they disagreed about who was buried there. Radical jihadist Salafis, in turn, generally rejected them as un-Islamic and even associated them with the old regime from 2014 onward.

In 2006, the emergence of a Baʿthi insurgency against the US-led coalition forces and the new Iraqi government under the label of sufism, Islam's mystical current that is commonly but mistakenly perceived as intrinsically moderate and peaceful, took most observers by surprise. The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Path (Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiyya, or JRTN) has fought as the leading unit of the Baʿthi umbrella resistance organization, the Highest Command for Jihad and Liberation (al-Qiyada al-ʿUliya li-l-Jihad wa-l-Tahrir), under the command of former vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council ʿIzzat Ibrahim al-Duri (d. 2020).[2] In 2014, JRTN's short-lived and unholy alliance with the

[1] The concept of sites or realms of memory, in the French original *les lieux de mémoire*, goes back to the French historian Pierre Nora. See Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, eds., *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[2] See Michael Knights, "The JRTN Movement and Iraq's Next Insurgency," *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 7 (2011): 1–6; and David Jordan, "Jaysh Rijāl al-Ṭarīqa al-Naqshbandīya: The Sufi Resistance of the Former Baʿth Party in Iraq," in

terrorists of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in their joint onslaught against the government of Nuri al-Maliki in Baghdad seemed to reaffirm once again the ruthlessness of these elements of the former regime. This alliance together with the prominent role of ex-Baʿthi army and police officers in the IS leadership seduced many Iraqis as well as international observers into wrongly assuming that these Baʿthis had infiltrated the IS and used it as a vehicle to return to power.[3]

Against this background, recent scholarly debates revolve around the causal effects of the former Baʿth regime's religious politics on the rise of radical Islamism in Iraq after 2003, and particularly the regime's implementation of the National Faith Campaign (1993–2003). Does Saddam Hussein's Faith Campaign represent an ideological "U-turn from secularism to Islamism" and a top-down Islamization of the Baʿth Party and Iraqi society that set the country's Sunnis up "to be susceptible to al-Qaeda after the 2003 U.S. invasion, and, eventually, ISIS"?[4] Or did the regime merely continue to propagate its original abstract Baʿthi-nationalist understanding of an Arab Islam and, on the contrary, Baʿthize Islam?[5] Ultimately, both approaches to the Baʿth regime's Islam, presented here in a very condensed form, often remain on a rather vague and abstract level, focusing much more on politics than on Sunni Islam in the specific Iraqi context. To better understand Baʿthi religious politics and its impact on state and society, I argue that we need to look much more closely at the core of the brand of Islam that the regime promoted and the religious representatives it recruited for this effort. The puzzling ties of the Baʿth regime to sufism along with its attempts to strengthen "moderate Islam" against religious extremism in Iraq have remained largely absent from these debates.[6] Due to the strong focus on Baʿth–Shiʿa relations and the general neglect of Iraq's Sunni Islam in scholarship, sufism has been mostly, but erroneously, perceived as a marginal tradition in decline. But in the second half of the 20th century, Islam's mystical traditions still had a predominant impact on Sunni, and even some Shiʿi believers, when it came to popular religious practices and even the study of Islamic law.

The Secular Baʿth Regime, Sufism, and Religious Politics Before and After 2003

As counterintuitive as it may seem at a first glance, the Baʿthi Naqshbandi insurgency is the legacy of the regime's long-standing efforts to strengthen a "moderate Islam" in Iraq. It is the latest expression in a long history of the regime's gradual incorporation of sufism and the sufis into its religious policies and its strong personal entanglement with these religious circles. The regime's support of the mystical current of Islam as a moderate Islam explicitly to counter radical Islamism was a gradual process that grew steadily from 1968 to 2003, culminating in a state-sponsored revival of sufi Islam in Iraq.

These efforts started as early as the 1970s with the gradual incorporation of religious scholars with a sufi orientation into state services of nationalized religious schools and

Jihadism Revisited: Rethinking a Well-Known Phenomenon, ed. Rüdiger Lohlker and Tamara Abu-Hamdeh (Berlin: Logos, 2019).

[3] One proponent of this view is, for instance, Christoph Reuter, *Die schwarze Macht: Der "Islamische Staat" und die Strategen des Terrors* (Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2015). Meanwhile, this exaggerated hypothesis has already been rectified by Craig Whiteside, "A Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba'athist Influence in the Islamic State Movement," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017): 2–18; and Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), ch. 5.

[4] This view was affirmed in Amatzia Baram, "Saddam's ISIS: Tracing the Roots of the Caliphate," *Foreign Affairs*, 13 April 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2016-04-08/saddams-isis.

[5] Answering Baram, this view was expressed in Samuel Helfont and Michael Brill, "Saddam Did Not Create ISIS: Getting the Terrorist Group's Origin Story Right," *Foreign Affairs*, 21 April 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2016-04-20/saddam-did-not-create-isis.

[6] A more detailed analysis and discussion of Baʿthi religious politics and Sufism, briefly summarized in the following paragraphs, can be found in David Jordan, *State and Sufism in Iraq: Building a "Moderate Islam" under Saddam Husayn* (London: Routledge, 2022).

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the Ministry of Awqaf.[7] These were Sunni scholars who emerged from the traditional religious schools such as the one in Samarra (which was known as al-Madrasa al-ʿIlmiyya al-Diniyya) and its offshoots in western Iraq. They combined their education in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) with a more scholarly and sober sufism that emphasized its scriptural basis and a strong orientation toward Islamic law according to the shariʿa. In the Kurdish regions, the regime entered long-term political alliances with Kurdish sufi shaykhs, whose tribes formed paramilitary fighting forces against the Kurdish nationalists under Mulla Mustafa al-Barzani and later against the Iranian enemy during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88).[8] During the war years, these scholars and shaykhs gained enormous popularity in the regime's religious propaganda against Ayatollah Khomeini's Shiʿi Islamist threat, for instance in so-called Committees for the Raising of Religious Awareness (Lijan al-Tawʿiya al-Diniyya) that toured the country and front line for religious instruction.[9] The aforementioned religious scholars also took leading positions in newly founded Baʿthi institutes of higher religious education with the task of molding a new and modern man of religion.[10] State patronage of sufi shaykhs and their orders steadily increased, and the regime itself heavily relied on and employed popular religious traditions such as saint veneration, prophetic genealogies, and shrine visitations to gain religious legitimacy in its massive restoration campaigns for mosques and shrines all over Iraq.[11]

After the second Gulf war and the southern intifada in 1991, the country's infrastructure was left largely devastated and the implementation of a UN embargo triggered a humanitarian crisis with rising crime rates.[12] With the beginning of the National Faith Campaign in 1993, the top-down revival of sufism became, for the first time, a priority under the auspices of ʿIzzat Ibrahim al-Duri. Then the regime fully reverted to the active spread of its own Baʿth-aligned Islam through all strata of society, including the Baʿth Party itself. It wielded the Sunni scholars' shariʿa-minded sufism with a strong orientation toward the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions as educational tools against the perceived moral decay in Iraq's crisis-ridden society and as a national Islam to stand against the spread of radical Wahhabism and Salafism.[13] It was only during the 1990s that ʿIzzat Ibrahim revealed, for the first time, his mystical orientation in the public media, praised the sufi shaykhs in his speeches, and publicly toured sufi shrines.[14] The aforementioned religious scholars gained further leading positions in the state's higher religious education institutions such as the Saddam University for Islamic Studies, where they organized annual conferences together with ʿIzzat Ibrahim al-Duri to encourage the study of a shariʿa-minded sufism as the true form of Islam in Iraq. These conferences promoted the idea that Baghdad should reemerge as the global capital of sufism.[15] Other institutions included the Saddam Higher Institute for the Study of the Blessed Qur'an and the Esteemed Sunna (Maʿhad Saddam al-ʿAli li-Dirasat

[7] Ibid., 66–73.

[8] Ibid., 94–97.

[9] See, for instance in the Iraqi newspaper *al-Jumhuriyya*, 21 December 1981, 4; 20 February 1982, 4; 13 September 1987, 7.

[10] See, for instance, *al-Jumhuriyya*, 24 April 1984, 4. Among these institutes were the Higher Islamic Institute for the Preparation of Imams and Preachers (al-Maʿhad al-Islami al-ʿAli li-Iʿdad al-Aʾimma wa-l-Khutabaʾ) founded in 1985 and the Saddam University for Islamic Studies (Jamiʿat Saddam li-l-ʿUlum al-Islamiyya) founded in 1989. See Jordan, *State and Sufism*, ch. 5.

[11] Ibid., 113–23, 152–58. Particularly the Kasnazaniyya, a subbranch of the Qadiriyya order, emerged under state patronage during the 1980s as the most successful and widespread order in Iraq; ibid., 158–64.

[12] See Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst, 2011), chs. 4, 5.

[13] Jordan, *State and Sufism*, 189–94.

[14] ʿIzzat Ibrahim and his whole family had already been followers of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Karim al-Kasnazani, the grandfather of the current Shaykh Nehru, since the late 1950s. Moreover, his tribal clan is also linked to the Rifaʿiyya and his networks included many shaykhs of the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya as well; see ibid., 225–30. For his prayising of Sufi shaykhs and shrine visits, see *al-Jumhuriyya*, 5 September 1995, 3; *al-Thawra*, 14 March 2002, 2.

[15] See, for instance, ʿAli ʿAbd al-Amir, "Nadwa ʿan al-Tasawwuf wa-Nashʾatuhu," *al-Hayyat*, 19 May 2001.

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al-Qurʾan al-Karim wa-l-Sunna al-Nabawiyya al-Sharifa), where the same scholars taught the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions to Baʿth Party members.[16]

In an attempt to counteract the growing sectarianism in Iraq during the 1990s, the regime also tried to exploit the ecumenical traditions of sufi Islam, which were intended to bridge the confessional gaps between Sunnis and Shiʿis. The regime's violent crackdown on the insurgents during the intifada and its bombing of the Shiʿi sanctuaries in Karbala left a rift and trauma among Iraq's southern Shiʿi population. Surprisingly, ʿIzzat Ibrahim al-Duri now began to praise the Twelver Shiʿa's first Imam ʿAli b. Abi Talib in front of Najaf's Shiʿa audience as the fountain of knowledge, spiritual paths, and the truth of sufism, its spiritual lineages (*salāsil*) and religious practice. Sunnis greatly revere Imam ʿAli, although, unlike the Shiʿis, they do not ascribe to him the religious status of infallible imam. Sunni sufis revere him even more in this regard because the Twelve Imams play a central role as authorities in the transmission of spiritual wisdom in sufism. Al-Duri aimed to use Imam ʿAli's role in this context as a trans-sectarian bridge to Iraq's Shiʿa community, highlighting the shared veneration of the descendants of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt).[17] These superficial or quasi-ecumenical attempts were linked to the increasing restoration of sufi and Shiʿi shrines and *takāyā* and the state's promotion of saint veneration and shrine visitations as popular practices.[18]

The regime's political instrumentalization of sufism within the secular ideological framework of Baʿthism and Arabism and its close personal entanglement with sufis is clearly reflected in JRTN's self-representation and membership after 2003. Throughout the last decade, several members of Saddam Hussein's and ʿIzzat Ibrahim al-Duri's families and tribes could be found in the leadership of JRTN, including one nephew, six brothers-in-law, and the two oldest sons of al-Duri as well as Saddam's half-nephews ʿUmar and ʿAyman Sibʿawi Ibrahim al-Hasan (whose father headed the General Intelligence apparatus).[19] The group's emblem features the old Baʿth Party symbol, with a raised green relief of the Arab nation in the background that bears as a motto part of the Qurʾanic verse 61:13, "Help from God and a speedy victory" (*Naṣr min Allāh wa-fatḥ qarīb*). The green map is framed from above by Iraq's national flag under the Baʿth regime, from below by the group's name and from the right by a sniper rifle (Fig. 1).

In the first issue of its online magazine titled al-Naqshbandiyya, JRTN dedicates a two-page article to the rightfulness of its oath of allegiance (*mubāyaʿa*) to the Baʿth Supreme Command. It defends cooperation with the secular Baʿth Party that was founded by, among others, the Syrian Orthodox Christian Michel ʿAflaq, and rejects any excommunication (*takfīr*) of it as an infidel party from an Islamic legal perspective.[20] The political rhetoric in its online magazine is saturated with the typical Baʿthist anti-Zionism, anti-Americanism, and hostility toward the Iranian "Safawi" government.[21] The group's published battle chants

[16] A glimpse of the institute's outlook was presented, for instance, in *al-Thawra*, 18 October 2001, 4. For more details and my interviews with two senior Baʿth Party members who graduated from the Higher Institute, see Jordan, *State and Sufism*, 189–90.

[17] Al-Duri's address was printed in *al-Thawra*, 25 November 1996, 4.

[18] A *takiyya* (plural *takāyā*) is a sufi establishment where sufis gather around a shaykh and perform their rituals and devotions; see Nathalie Clayer, "Tekke," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 114–15. For the state-sponsored restoration campaigns and promotion of saint veneration, see Jordan, *State and Sufism*, 206–12.

[19] Mazin Khalid, "al-Baʿthiyyin fi Qaʾimat Ahamm al-Matlubin," al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin, 19 February 2018, http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=589714; and Jordan, "Jaysh Rijāl Al-Ṭarīqa al-Naqshbandīya," 64–65.

[20] Al-Mujahid al-Duktur Abu al-Khayr al-Naqshbandi, "Mashruʿiyyat Mubayaʿat al-Qiyada al-ʿUlya li-l-Jihad wa-l-Tahrir min al-Nahiyya al-Diniyya," al-Naqshbandiyya, 15 November 2007.

[21] The historical reference to the Safavids of 16th- to 18th-century Iran, who declared Shiʿism as the religion of the state in Iran and persecuted Sunnis, specifically Naqshbandi sufis, serves to brand the Iranian government as sectarian and anti-Sunni.

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Figure 1. JRTN (Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiyya) emblem. Source: al-Naqshbandiyya, no. 67, 2012, title page.

(*anāshīd*) and poetry still feature a strong personality cult and glorifying memory of Saddam Hussein, and now also of ʿIzzat Ibrahim al-Duri, as the ultimate and rightful leader figures.[22]

Although the Iraqi media and new government have publicly outlawed JRTN as "radical" (*mutaṭarrif*) terrorists with a "stern religious attitude" (*mutashaddid*), the group itself defines its doctrine as a "moderate sufism," that is "based on the tolerant Islamic shariʿa." It rejects any sectarianism (*ṭāʾifiyya*), racism (*ʿunṣuriyya*), or excommunication of other Muslims (*takfīr*) as practiced by radical Islamists such as the IS. This also includes a stress on respect for Iraq's houses of worship and the shrines of prophets, saints, and the pious.[23] The movement strongly emphasizes ethnic unity and addresses Kurds and Turkomans through a shared piety and Islamic religion. Its claims to have members from among the Kurdish Barzinji, Zibari, Jaf, and other tribes mirror longtime Baʿthi–Kurdish alliances in the National Defense Battalions during the 1980s.[24] Like the former Baʿth religious politics, the movement also stresses a superficial or quasi-ecumenism between Sunna and Shiʿa founded on the common Sufi and Shiʿi veneration of the Prophet's offspring. One paradigm here is the memory of the close relationships of love (*mawadda*) and kinship (*qurbā*) between the Prophet's companions (*aṣḥāb*) and the "pure people of his house" through intermarriage between the rightly guided caliphs and the Prophet's daughters and granddaughters. This is interpreted as the Prophetic education of love and unity as opposed to separation and mutual killing in Sunni–Shiʿi relations.[25] Naqshbandi battle chants and poems praise the imams al-ʿAbbas, al-Husayn, and ʿAli b. Abi Talib, and videos feature their sanctuaries prominently as sites

[22] Sumayraʾ al-ʿUbaydi, *Dhabu ha l-ʿAgal* (Amman: Dar Dijla, 2015); al-ʿUbaydi is JRTN's popular female poet and fighter.

[23] "ʿAqidat Jayshina," al-Mawqiʿ al-Rasmi li-Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiyya, 2018, https://www.alnakshabandia.net/army/index.php/our-approach.

[24] "Liqaʾ maʿa Mujahid," al-Naqshbandiyya, January 2008; and Jordan, "Jaysh Rijāl Al-Ṭarīqa al-Naqshbandīya," 65.

[25] Al-Mujahid Haydar al-Tamimi, "Qul La Asʾalukum ʿalayhi Ajran illa l-Mawaddata fi-l-Qurba," al-Naqshbandiyya, January 2007.

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of memory for a united nation.[26] A few lines of the poem "I am a Naqshbandi Soldier" (Ana Jundi Naqshbandi) by a certain Abu Layth al-Tikriti, for instance, read:

> I am Shiʿi, I am Sunni.
> Ask for me those who have left [for jihad].
> I am from the army of the men.
> . . .
> We are all, despite the sects (*al-ṭawāʾif*)—brothers in this Iraq.[27]

Sectarian Competition, the Sufi Insurgency, and Religious Extremism after 2003

Ever since the Baʿth regime's ouster in 2003, intersectarian and intrasectarian as well as interethnic and intraethnic competition and tensions have remained among the most pressing challenges to national cohesion in Iraq.[28] Many political parties clearly see and articulate the need to overcome sectarian competition and conflict, particularly between Sunnis and Shiʿa, and the idea of state promotion of a "moderate" sufi Islam has not lost its relevance in the face of this challenge.[29] In fact, recourse to sufism as a force to bridge Sunni–Shiʿi sectarian gaps can still be witnessed among several, often competitive factions in Iraq, including JRTN, part of the federal government, many sufis themselves, and the radical Shiʿi militia League of the People of Truth (ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq).[30] However, in the face of the ever-growing salience of literalist interpretations of Islam that strictly emphasize sectarian differences and the ongoing sectarian factionalism by strong radical Islamist parties and militias

[26] A video of the battle chant *Nashid Hayy Allah al-Rijal al-Naqshbandiyya* was originally published by Muʾassasat al-Ahfad al-ʿIlamiyya on YouTube in 2014. Another version of it can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wzQc2kEOb8. See also, ʿUbaydi, *Dhabu ha l-ʿAgal*, 41, 49.

[27] Al-Mujahid Abu Layth al-Tikriti, "Ana Jundi Naqshbandi," al-Naqshbandiyya, April 2008.

[28] For a summary of Iraq's current and future problems after the liberation of Mosul from the IS, see Ibrahim al-Marashi, "What Future for Iraq? Unity and Partition after Mosul," in *After Mosul: Re-Inventing Iraq*, ed. Andrea Plebani (Milan: Ledizioni, 2017), 13–32, https://doi.org/10.14672/67056330. On the problem of sectarianism in Iraqi education after 2003, see Achim Rohde, "Change and Continuity in Arab Iraqi Education: Sunni and Shi'i Discourses in Iraqi Textbooks Before and After 2003," *Comparative Education Review* 57, no. 4 (2013): 711–34, https://doi.org/10.1086/671561.

[29] See, for instance, Elisheva Machlis's analysis of Sunni political participation and cooperation with the new Kurdish Shiʿi federation after 2003, "Sunni Participation in a Shi'i-Led Iraq: Identity Politics and the Road to Redefining the National Ethos," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 22, no. 1 (2022): 43–62, https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12358.

[30] The president of Iraq from 2005 until 2014, Jalal Talabani (1933–2017), for instance, hailed from a famous Kurdish tribal clan with a long history in the Qadiriyya order and strongly supported the order's most important mosque-shrine complex of ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166) in Baghdad. See Martin van Bruinessen, "The Qadiriyya and the Lineages of Qadiri Shaykhs in Kurdistan," *Journal of the History of Sufism*, no. 1–2 (2000): 131–49.

The most popular instance of sufis who emphasize ecumenical traditions were the shaykhs of the Qadiriyya-Kasnazaniyya. The order's former shaykh, Muhammad ʿAbd al-Karim and his son and successor Nehru al-Kasnazani, together with Nehru's brothers, emerged as influential political players in Iraq after 2003 and heavily advertised this order's ecumenical approach and their successful transgression of sectarian boundaries through a large following among Sunnis and Shiʿis of all ethnic communities in Iraq. See Nehru Muhammad ʿAbd al-Karim al-Kasnazani, "Tahaluf al-Wahda al-Wataniyya al-ʿIraqi," Tajammuʿ al-Wahda al-Wataniyya al-ʿIraqi, 11 July 2009, http://www.cinu-dn.com/althalf.php; and al-Tariqa al-ʿAliyya al-Qadiriyya al-Kasnazāniyya, "Majlis al-Nur al-Muhammadi al-Husayni fi Ihyaʾ ʿAshuraʾ al-Imam al-Husayn ʿalayhi al-Salat wa-l-Salam," YouTube video, 25 August 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgL0DUSD6G8.

Notwithstanding the fact that the League of the People of Truth was otherwise known for its violent assaults against other Sunnis, the militia's leader, Qays al-Khazʿali, demanded that the division between Sunna and Shiʿa in Iraq be overcome on the basis of the Sunni sufi's love of the Ahl al-Bayt. See Muhammad al-Dulaymi, "Kalimat al-Shaykh al-Khazʿali bi-Haqq al-Tasawwuf wa-l-Turuq al-Sufiyya wa-minha al-Tariqa al-Kasnazaniyya wa-Hubbuhum li-Ahl al-Bayt," YouTube video, 6 October 2015, 1:19–5:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llReCjyMwB0.

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in Iraq, as well as the lack of strong institutional support by most of the federal government, these sufi traditions and their representatives have only limited social impact.

Tensions were already foreshadowed by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority's installation of a transitional government based on explicit ethno-sectarian differences, which for the first time fostered the dangerous political formalization of sectarianism in Iraq. In August 2003, this provisional government officially dissolved the Baʿth regime's centralized Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, which had overseen all religious institutions in Iraq, and created instead three distinct semiautonomous offices enabling more self-regulation by the respective communities: the Sunni Waqf Office (Diwan al-Waqf al-Sunni), the Shiʿi Waqf Office (Diwan al-Waqf al-Shiʿi), and the Awqaf Office of Christian, Yazidi, and Sabean Mandean Religions in Iraq (Diwan Awqaf al-Diyanat al-Masihiyya wa-l-Ayzidiyya, wa-l-Sabiʾa al-Mandaʾiyya).[31] Since then, the Sunni Waqf Office has been in political conflict with its Shiʿi counterpart and the government, as evidenced by a series of political dismissals, particularly of Sunni waqf presidents, on grounds of sectarianism or corruption. The two offices have an ongoing dispute over memories about the origin of religious sites and their ownership and administration across the country.[32] Moreover, the political marginalization of Iraq's Sunni Arab population through de-Baʿthification, the eruption of extreme sectarian violence during the civil war between 2006 and 2008, various forms of latent sectarian tension, and the rise of the so-called Islamic State terrorism in 2014 further intensified sectarian divisions in the country.[33]

Sunni waqf officials have regularly accused the Shiʿi Waqf Office of illegally seizing their mosques and shrines, particularly in mixed Sunni–Shiʿi regions such as Basra, Baghdad, Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Kirkuk, where the administration and denominational affiliation of many mosques and shrines has never been strictly separated.[34] A prominent case in point is the ongoing quarrel over Samarra's ʿAskari shrine, which houses the tombs of the tenth and eleventh imams of the Twelver Shiʿa, ʿAli al-Hadi (d. 868) and al-Hasan al-ʿAskari (d. 874), who are to a lesser degree but nevertheless important saintly figures for the Sunni population. According to the contemporary Sunni Iraqi hadith scholar Yasir Muhammad Yasin al-Badri, the holy shrines of both imams are the major reason for the permanent presence of sufism in the city, because the people of the Prophet's house, the Ahl al-Bayt, are the basis of its teachings and its golden spiritual lineage (*silsilatihi al-dhahabiyya*).[35] Since 2005, the Shiʿi Waqf Office has claimed, for the first time, the exclusive administrative rights and the right to appoint the custodians of the shrines (also called *ʿatabāt*) of the imams of the Ahl al-Bayt in Najaf, Karbala, Kazimiyya, and Samarra, and over the shrines of their offspring who belong to the school of the Ahl al-Bayt, here interpreted as the Shiʿa, across Iraq. In December 2005, the government passed Law 19, creating an administrative office for the *ʿatabāt* within the Shiʿi Waqf Office, which at that time received their exclusive administration rights. This office was part of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs under the Baʿth regime.[36] Prior to this, the government had always appointed the actual custodians (*sadana*) of the *ʿatabāt* from among the local inhabitants; since the

[31] See Governing Council Resolution 29 of August 2003 in Stefan Talmon, *The Occupation of Iraq: The Official Documents of the Coalition Provisional Authority and the Iraqi Governing Council*, vol. 2 (Oxford, UK: Bloomsbury, 2013), 292.

[32] For an overview of the evolution of this conflict, see Harith Hasan, "Religious Authority and the Politics of Islamic Endowments in Iraq," Political Islam series, Carnegie Middle East Center, March 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.

[33] Fanny Lafourcade, "How to 'Turn the Page,'" in *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, ed. Jordi Tejel Gorgas and Peter Sluglett (Singapore: World Scientific, 2012), 181–201; and Marashi, "What Future for Iraq?" 16–17.

[34] An overview on this conflict is offered by Hasan, "Religious Authority," 3–5.

[35] Yasir Muhammad Yasin al-Badri al-Husayni, "al-Takaya wa-l-Turuq al-Sufiyya bi-Samarraʾ wa-Diyala Hadiran," in *al-Tasawwuf fi l-ʿIraq* (Dubai: Markaz al-Misbar li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Buhuth, 2012), 127.

[36] See Ghazi ʿAjil al-Yawir, ʿAdil ʿAbd al-Mahdi, and Jalal al-Talabani, "Qanun Idarat al-ʿAtabat al-Muqaddasa wa-l-Mazarat al-Shiʿiyya al-Sharifa," *Pubic Law Number* 19, no. 4 (2005).

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Ottoman period, the traditional custodians of the ʿAskari shrine came from the Sunni sufi family of the Salih al-Shaykh in Samarra.

Only two months after the passing of Law 19, a terrorist bomb attack, presumably carried out by al-Qaeda, destroyed the ʿAskari shrine's dome, triggering a wave of sectarian bloodshed and the 2006–8 civil war.[37] Outraged by this event, the Shiʿi office took the restoration of the shrine into its own hands and closed down the entire shrine area for security reasons in 2007. The Sunni Waqf Office and Samarra's local Sunni inhabitants have protested heavily against Shiʿi authority over the shrine and their occupation of the areas surrounding it ever since.[38] However, the president of the Shiʿi Waqf Office, Salih al-Haydari, has repeatedly denied all Sunni accusations of illegal seizures and defended the *ʿatabāt* administration by the Shiʿis, according to the respective law. He additionally buttressed this privilege by claiming a specific and exclusive Shiʿi "intellectual and dogmatic link" to the *Ahl al-Bayt*.[39]

Late in 2013, JRTN and the newly proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, or greater Syria, (ISIS), accompanied by a galaxy of Sunni and jihadist militias, took advantage of the Sunni protest movement against their political marginalization in Iraq and attacked the central government. This joint onslaught between January and June 2014 cut through previous sectarian division lines and had a devastating effect on the life of both non-Muslim and Muslim communities and religious cohesion in Iraq. Insurgents overran major cities such as Falluja, Ramadi, Mosul, Tikrit, and Kirkuk, allowing the dominating ISIS to take control of large parts of northwestern and central Iraq and establish its notorious caliphate of terror.[40] The terrorists of the now self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) not only turned on their temporary allies by killing Baʿthists and decimating JRTN units, but brought irrevocable suffering and destruction to non-Muslims and Muslims alike, including Sunni sufis and Shiʿis, and their religious sanctuaries, in the areas they conquered. After 2003, radical Islamists such as al-Qaʿida had attacked religious scholars with a sufi orientation, sufi shaykhs, and their spiritual centers in Iraq time and again; but now they were exposed to outright persecution. Islamic State ideologues, with their rigorous interpretation of monotheism, condemned sufism and its traditions and practices as forms of polytheism, therefore un-Islamic. Between 2014 and 2018, IS insurgents systematically assassinated sufi scholars, persecuted and beheaded sufi shaykhs, and destroyed *takāyā* and shrines of prophets and Sufi and Shiʿi saints—many of which had been restored by the Baʿth regime. In November 2014, IS terrorists filmed their destruction of the shrine of the local Sunni saint Yahya b. Muhammad al-Durri in the city of Dur, ʿIzzat Ibrahim al-Duri's hometown in the Salah al-Din province.[41] Before destroying it, they filmed a close-up of an inscription at the entrance of the shrine that included the date of its restoration on the order of Saddam Hussein's former second-in-command in 1976, thereby identifying it with the old regime. Among the countless shrines and mosques that were destroyed by the IS terrorists were famous historical buildings such as the mosques of the prophets Yunus, Jirjis, and Shit in Mosul, but also the shrine of Saddam Hussein's father in Tikrit. Saddam Hussein's

[37] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 181.

[38] See, for instance, ʿAlaʾ Yusuf, "Khilaf Hawla Milkiyyat al-ʿAtabat bi-l-ʿIraq," Aljazeera, 6 April 2012, https://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2012/6/4/خلاف-حول-ملكية-العتبات-بالعراق.

[39] "Raʾis al-Waqf al-Shiʿi: Baʿd al-Siyasiyin Yahawilun Idkhal al-Qadiyya al-Taʾifiyya Dimna Matalib al-Mutazahirin min Ajl Makasib Shakhsiyya," Wakalat Nun al-Khabariyya, 22 January 2013, http://non14.net/39853.

[40] Gerges, *ISIS*, 124–28.

[41] Yahya, whose life data are unknown, is said to be a descendant of the seventh Imam Musa al-Kazim. His shrine is located near the most splendid shrine of his father in Dur as well as the shrines of the sufi shaykhs ʿAbd al-Karim Hamad al-Nuʿaymi, Sayyid Hamad b. Mahmud al-Nuʿaymi (d. 1983), and Sayyid Salih Ibrahim al-Nuʿaymi (1898–1958) from the Buyud section (*farʿ*) of the Nuʿaym tribe in Tikrit. See Yunus al-Shaykh Ibrahim al-Samarraʾi, *Taʾrikh al-Dur Qadiman wa Hadithan* (Baghdad: Matbaʿat Dar al-Basri, 1966). All these shrines were destroyed.

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mausoleum, in turn, was desecrated and bombed by Shiʿi militias after they reconquered al-ʿAwja and Tikrit.[42]

The IS reign of terror was driven back only gradually by a cross-sectarian alliance of the Iraqi army, so-called irregular (mostly Shiʿi but some Sunni) Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Shaʿbi), and an international coalition. The battle against the Jihadi-Salafi terrorists united the country's major sects, ethnic groups, and parties temporarily, but it left numerous Sunni mosques and shrines in the northwest of Iraq destroyed or occupied by Shiʿi militias. In Iraq today, the semiautonomous Sunni and Shiʿi Waqf Offices unofficially continue to pursue their antagonistic sectarian paths. There is no foreseeable definitive solution to this ongoing conflict.

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[42] *Iʿlam Wilayat Salah al-Din Yuqaddim Hadam al-Awthan al-Jawda al-Asliyya* (Salah al-Din Province, Iraq: al-Maktab al-Iʿlami li-Wilayat Salah al-Din, 2014); "Marahil Tadmir al-Milishiyyat al-Shiʿiyya li-Qabr al-Raʾis al-ʿIraqi al-Rahil Saddam Husayn," Orient TV, YouTube video, 16 March 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAucqkiv6h0; Kasir al-Amwaj, "Haraq Qabr al-Taghiya Saddam," YouTube video, 8 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFPiT1h7wQs.

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