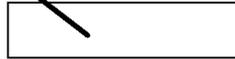




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# Iraq: Social and Political Factors Deter Religious Revival

A Research Paper

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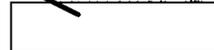
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# Iraq: Social and Political Factors Deter Religious Revival

A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by   
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis.  
It was coordinated with the Directorate of  
Operations. 

Comments and queries are welcome and may be  
directed to the Chief,  NESA



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**Iraq: Social and  
Political Factors Deter  
Religious Revival**

**Key Judgments**

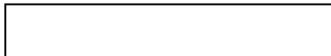
*Information available  
as of 1 November 1983  
was used in this report*

We believe that Iraq exhibits many of the signs of stress-inducing cultural disarray—economic downturn, rapid cultural change, and an unresolved war—that have led to religious revivalist movements in other parts of the Muslim world. Several factors, however, principally the lack of charismatic fundamentalist leadership and the division of the country's population into different religious communities (roughly equal numbers of Sunnis and Shias) will work against the development of a strong fundamentalist religious movement in Iraq in the foreseeable future.

President Saddam Husayn's policies will continue to deter the rise of a prophetic religious leader who could guide a regime-threatening fundamentalist movement:

- He appeases potential fundamentalist opposition, particularly the Shias, by pouring money into the development of their neighborhoods, cities, and religious shrines.
- He ruthlessly suppresses those individuals or groups whom he considers a threat to his regime.
- He advances his cult of personality to maximize his appeal to all Iraqis. Many, particularly the poor, ascribe to Saddam the charisma that is commonly associated with religious prophets.
- He alters Ba'hist policies to appeal to the full range of Iraqi society—Shias as well as Sunnis, Kurds as well as Arabs.
- He challenges Khomeini's Islamic rhetoric in order to blunt the attraction of Iran's radical policies among Iraq's Shias.

If the outlook for the war and the economy fails to improve, political and cultural disarray is likely to increase, which will, in turn, translate into more Islamic activity, especially among the disadvantaged Shias. Increased fundamentalist fervor in the society would force Saddam, or a successor, to modify government policies to appease fundamentalist critics. A greater fundamentalist influence in the government would result in Washington increasingly interacting with a government less sympathetic to Western policies.



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**Iraq: Social and Political Factors Deter Religious Revival**

Iraq shows many of the signs of cultural disintegration—a stalemated war, economic decline, the presence of large numbers of foreigners, rapid cultural change, and a repressive government—that have accompanied the birth of fundamentalist religious movements in the Middle East and elsewhere. A closer look—coupled with behavioral science theories that explain religious revivals—suggests, however, that key factors are lacking for a full-scale religious revolution to take place. Chief among the missing elements are a religiously and ethnically homogeneous population and a prophetic religious leader who could rally support against the secular rule of President Saddam Husayn and his Ba’thist regime. The first of these will not change appreciably; the second factor—the missing prophet—is, we believe, a key to the future of fundamentalism in Iraq.



**The Rise of Fundamentalism:  
The Behavioral Science Theory**

**The First Step: Cultural Disintegration**

Following Khomeini’s rise to power in Iran, behavioral scientists as well as intelligence analysts have focused on identifying the key factors giving rise to fundamentalist religious movements in the Middle East and elsewhere. They theorize that cultural disintegration frequently leads to psychological stress and aberrant behavior in groups as well as in individuals because the group’s cultural models of how the world should work—believed to be immutable truth—no longer relate to changing political, social, or economic circumstances. They further believe that outbreaks of religious fundamentalism are almost always characteristic of threatened or disintegrating societies. In the Muslim world, for example:



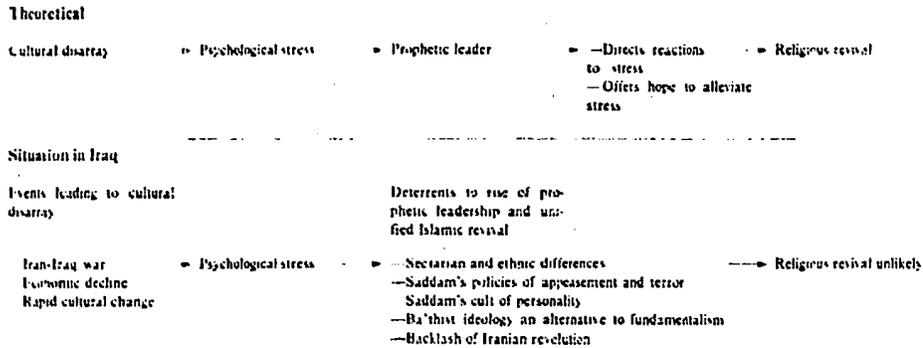
**The Second Step: Arrival of the Prophet**

According to behavioral science theory, the rise of a prophetic religious leader is the second step in the formation of a religious fundamentalist movement. An environment of cultural disarray provides the necessary setting for an individual, claiming to have received divine revelation, to assert that he can right the wrongs of society, channel its anger, offer hope to its people, and lead them to a better future. Such a prophet exhibits certain traits:

- He believes that he has been sent on a divinely inspired mission (and is considered to be divine by his followers).



**Figure 1**  
**Rise of Religious Fundamentalism**



- He believes his value system is under attack, often by a conspiracy of outsiders.
- He has no doubt in the absolute authenticity or superiority of his values.
- He is intolerant of all other beliefs.
- He can mirror the anxieties of society, articulate its wishes, and communicate his mission to a willing audience.

Historically, most individuals who claim to be prophets fail to rally wide support. Behavioral scientists believe they fail because:

- Their teachings do not fit existing cultural patterns.
- They make claims, such as the imminent death of enemies, that lack credibility.
- They aim their message at a narrow segment of society.
- Their revelation contradicts the established religious organization or previous sacred revelations.

**Conditions That Favor an Islamic Revival**

We believe that Iraq shows some of the signs of political, social, and economic disarray that have led to fundamentalist eruptions in other Muslim countries, but it lacks others—including a religiously homogeneous population and the presence of a charismatic religious leader—that would provide the impetus for a religious-based revolution. Key characteristics that favor more fundamentalist activity in Iraq are:

- It is embroiled in a long, stalemated war.
- Iraqis are feeling the hardships of the war-sapped economy.
- It has undergone rapid cultural change because of rapid urbanization, the influx of foreigners, and government policies.

**Stalemated War With Iran**

As the war drags on, we believe that mounting frustration among Iraqis increases the likelihood that they will be receptive to a prophetic individual who questions the righteousness of the war and President Saddam Husayn's regime, which has become closely linked with it. According to [ ] estimates, by mid-1983 the war had resulted in an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 Iraqi soldiers killed, at least 200,000 wounded, and as many as 50,000 taken captive by Iran. In a nation with a total population of about 14 million, the war has personally affected nearly everyone through the loss of a friend or relative. [ ]

Thus far neither Saddam nor Iraq's secularism is being directly blamed for the war casualties. Even though faithful Iraqi families probably are comforted by their belief that their sons have died as martyrs and are placated by the regime's liberal compensation for their loss, we believe that these mystical and monetary compensations will not work indefinitely and that continued casualties eventually could heighten the appeal of religious revivalist rhetoric. [ ]

**Economic Decline**

[ ]  
Iraq has been forced to adopt economic austerity measures to cope with the revenue shortfalls caused by the rapid decline in Iraq's oil revenues from \$25 billion in 1980 to \$9.5 billion in 1982 and a concomitant downturn in the entire economy:

- Raising income taxes.
- Cutting back economic development programs.
- Canceling almost all new contracts not related to defense or petroleum programs.
- Postponing work on several construction projects that were under way.
- Restricting sales of consumer goods at state retail stores.
- Slowing the sale of luxury imported goods. [ ]

Escalating inflation, now approaching 40 percent, is causing a shortage of consumer goods [ ]

[ ] Although staples and other essential items are in stock, fresh fruits, vegetables, and other perishables are expensive. Gasoline is in short supply, lines at service stations are long, and spare parts for many vehicles are unavailable. [ ]

If the war continues to sap the economy, we believe that some dissatisfied Iraqis could follow the pattern of Egypt's Muslim militants who asserted that economic stagnation was linked to a betrayal of Islamic traditions. Saddam, with mixed success, according to press reporting, has tried to exploit hard-bop to promote patriotic zeal through programs such as the collection of gold jewelry from Iraqi women to help fund the war effort. [ ]

**Rapid Cultural Change**

We believe that the rapid cultural change caused by urbanization, the increased presence of foreigners, and by Ba'hist secular policies has the potential for creating significant social and psychological stress which, in turn, could set the stage for a prophetic call for a new order that would revive the perceived stability of the past. [ ]

**Urbanization.** We believe that in Iraq, as in many other parts of the Middle East, rapid urbanization creates great stress in traditional society. In other Middle Eastern cities, Cairo and Tehran, for example, sociological studies of jailed Muslim extremists indicate that recent migrants from the rural areas, particularly the youth, have been the group most susceptible to Islamic revivalist rhetoric and the focus of discontent and dissension. [ ]

Baghdad, which has received large-scale migrations from the countryside since the late 1960s, has developed the same problems—crowding, poor housing, lack of services—that, according to our analysis, have contributed to the support for Islamic fundamentalist movements in other Middle Eastern cities. Baghdad's population, which, according to our estimates based on Iraqi census data, now stands at about 3.4 million, has nearly doubled since the Ba'thists seized power in 1968. Iraqi scholars believe that the city's growth was spurred by the Ba'thists' industrialization program and the faltering of their land reform and rural development programs. [ ]

*Presence of Foreigners.* We believe that Iraq's long period of foreign domination (under the Persians, Ottomans, and finally the British), coupled with its heavy reliance on foreigners to manage and staff its oil industry and development programs, contributes to the weakness of Iraqi national identity. Many Iraqis still identify themselves in tribal or village terms. An identity dilemma, according to many social scientists, has been a major contributor to the rise of fundamentalist activity. This is particularly notable in Pakistan, where President Zia is striving to use Islamic identity to overcome ethnic and sectarian differences. [ ]

Even if the war with Iran continues and oil production remains depressed, we expect a continued presence of large numbers of foreign workers. The war has boosted the need for foreign workers in order to free Iraqi men for military service. Based on our analysis of migrant workers in the Middle East, the number of foreign workers in Iraq has escalated from about 65,000 in 1975 to approximately 1.3 million in 1983. Approximately 1.2 million Egyptians are employed as skilled technicians, bankers, teachers, unskilled laborers, and farmers. Among the other 100,000 foreigners, Indians and Pakistanis supply much of the engineering and construction skills, and Chinese and Filipinos do much of the heavy labor. [ ]

[ ] about 16,000 Europeans serve as project supervisors, service engineers, and other management and technical personnel. [ ]

*Ba'thist Policies.* We believe that changes in some cultural traditions, which tend to induce psychological stress resulting in religious fundamentalism, are part of the goals of the Ba'thist regime:

- Although cultural change was already under way when the Ba'thists came to power in 1968, their social policies have speeded the shift from the extended to the nuclear family as the primary social unit. An Iraqi scholar says that the extended family, which perpetuated tribal rather than national identity, is losing its importance in socialization, health care, and as the primary economic unit.

[ ]

- The policies of the Ba'thist government, as well as the impact of the war, have elevated the position of women in Iraqi society. The Western press reports that the government encourages Iraqi women to work in factories, banks, and government offices. Some have even graduated from the Air Force Academy as fighter pilots. Although we have no evidence that Iraqis resent these changes, fundamentalists in other Muslim countries, particularly Pakistan, have demanded that women return to a more subordinate status.

- Women's rights were recognized in 1979 when the government liberalized laws on divorce. Contrary to Islamic tradition, men must now go to court to obtain a divorce, and women, for the first time, have the right to seek divorce from their husbands. [ ]

In addition to contributing to the destabilization of cultural change, we believe that the secularist policies of Saddam's Ba'thist government open a channel for Islamic revivalists to attribute any or all national problems—economic downturn, military setbacks, social crises—to the regime's infidelity to basic Islamic values. As in Iran, Egypt, and now Algeria, secularism, characterized by the exclusion of Islamic principles from government decisions, in our opinion, opens Saddam's regime to the charge that it lacks Islamic legitimacy. [ ]

#### Factors Against an Islamic Revival

Despite the evidence of social disarray in Iraq that could pave the way for a fundamentalist-instigated revolution, we believe that other factors—including Iraq's religious and ethnic diversity and the government's repression of all opposition—will, at least for the near term, preclude the coalescence of Iraqis around a prophetic religious leader who could threaten Saddam's regime. Furthermore, we see no indication [ ]

[ ] that Iraqis have exhibited the psychological reactions to the social and economic problems that

have given rise to fundamentalist religious movements elsewhere. Nothing like the massive psychological depression that occurred in Egypt following the war of 1967 has taken place. Unlike Nasser, who attributed Egypt's defeat in the war with Israel to failure to adhere to Islamic beliefs, no Iraqi political or religious leader has announced that Iraq's troubles stem from their failure to toe the conservative Islamic line.

**Sectarian and Ethnic Differences**

We believe that Iraq's sectarian and ethnic divisions (55 percent Shia and 43 percent Sunni Muslim; 70 percent Arab and 18 percent Kurd) substantially decrease the likelihood that a powerful religious leader could rally a following from a majority of the population.

We believe that the roughly equal Sunni-Shia split, in particular, precludes the prospects for an Iranian-style religious revolution. We believe it more likely that any large-scale religious fundamentalist movement would be concentrated among the Shias, who, despite their greater numbers, have long been disadvantaged politically and remain at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. Although  Saddam has tried to improve the Shias' lot economically and bring them into the mainstream, they remain geographically segregated and politically and economically subordinate to the Sunnis.  many have migrated to Baghdad, where they now comprise more than one-third of the population. More than 1 million have crowded into poor areas such as al-Thawra township, where the residents lacked basic urban services until Saddam initiated a redevelopment program in the late 1970s.

Despite proselytizing among Shias by Iran and the Shia opposition to the Saddam regime, Shia opposition has thus far been splintered into several factions that  have shown no signs of unification:

- *Dawa Party.* Founded in 1965, Dawa is the largest and most influential Shia opposition group. The bulk of its support comes from Iran and exiles in Jordan, the Gulf, and Europe.

- *Fatima Party.* Fatima cooperates with the Dawa Party but is very militant in its plans for a religious government in Iraq.

- *Islamic Movement in Iraq.* A very small group that probably receives funds from Iran, Libya, and Syria.

We believe that the possibility of a widespread Islamic revival among the Sunnis is lessened by their overall political and economic preeminence as well as by their division between Arabs and Kurds. The Arab Sunnis benefited the most from the increase in living standards before the war and are, in our opinion, more likely to be insulated from the stresses of economic decline and rapid cultural change than either the Shias or the Kurds. The Arab Sunnis dominate both the government and the leadership of the Ba'ath Party, while the Kurds, who have long sought self-rule for the mountainous region that they occupy in northern Iraq and the contiguous areas of Iran and Turkey, have traditionally opposed the government in Baghdad on nationalistic rather than on religious grounds. According to our estimates, there are approximately 15,000 Iraqi Kurds organized in several dissident groups backed by Syria and Iran. We believe that the animosity between the Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, heightened by Kurdish dissidence since the war began, is so great that a prophetic religious leader in one group would probably not be accepted by the other.

**Saddam's Policies: Appeasement and Terror**

In our opinion, Saddam has blunted the appeal of Islamic revivalist rhetoric as social and economic conditions have worsened by making effective use of a mixed policy, described by other Arabs as "appeasement and terror."

Saddam's policy of appeasement is based on his genuine desire to improve social

and economic conditions in order to forge a stronger Iraq from the mosaic of ethnic and religious groups. Examples of his efforts include:

- Subsidizing basic foodstuffs.
- Building low-cost housing and subsidizing housing for military families and survivors of the war.
- Providing inexpensive medical care.
- Emphasizing education and literacy at all levels.
- Providing greater security from persecution for religious minorities than under previous regimes.

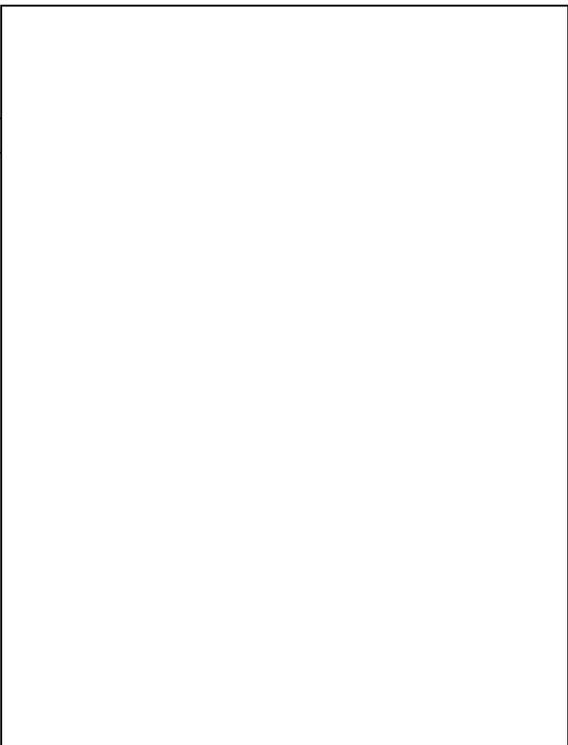
In an effort to gain the loyalties of the Shias and Kurds, we believe Saddam has channeled government spending and favors to them. For example, according to press accounts, he has spent millions on shrines, mosques, pilgrimages, and other religious affairs for the Shias. He has declared the birthday of Ali bin Abu Talib, believed by the Shias to be the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad, a national holiday. He has paid frequent visits to the Shia holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala and toured Shia areas promising new services and further reforms. In a speech in An Najaf he called for a "revival of heavenly values" and reasserted his family's claim of descent from the Prophet. His redevelopment program of new sewers, power, lighting, and housing for al-Thawra, a principal center of Shia unrest and notorious as one of the worst slums in the Middle East, is

beginning to transform it into a model district. It has been renamed Saddam City. The Kurds also have benefited from Saddam's largess through experiments with autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan and by a law that has exempted Kurds from military service.

In our judgment, the likelihood of the rise of a charismatic religious leader and a militant fundamentalist movement is further reduced because Saddam—through the Mukhabarat (security force), estimated to number 40,000—effectively suppresses all groups or individuals who try to flex any political muscle. As a measure of the massive government crackdowns on political dissidents,

a crash program has begun to expand the capacity of the country's central political criminal prison near Baghdad.

the prison housed 16,000 civilians charged or awaiting trial for political offenses as well as 12,000 military detainees charged with draft evasion or desertion.



Despite the regime's repression of the Shia opposition,

members of the Dawa Party were responsible for the assassination of two Iraqi Government officials in late February 1983. The two officials were killed by machinegun fire while they attended a ceremony marking the opening of an urban project in al-Thawra. Saddam had been

scheduled to attend the ceremony but that he canceled his appearance at the last moment. Dawa members said that the assassinated officials were advisers to Saddam and were sent to the ceremony in place of the President.

**Cult of Personality**

We believe that Saddam's cult of personality, which has a number of prophet-like features, lessens the possibility that a strong charismatic religious leader will arise in Iraq. Numerous sources report that:

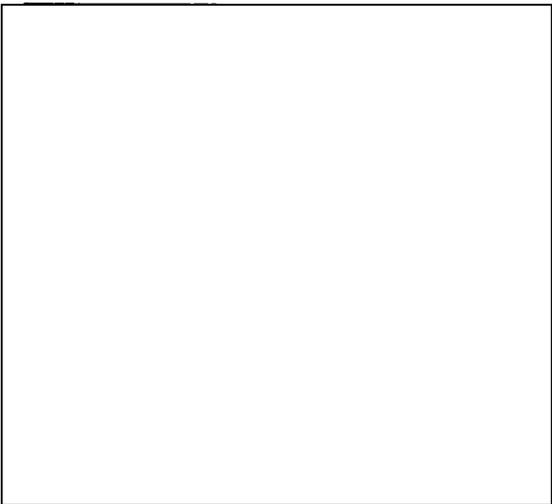
- He holds exaggerated views of his own capabilities.
- He is totally committed to his views.
- He deals ruthlessly with opponents or people who offer him poor advice.

In our view, Saddam has promoted a personality cult unrivaled in the Middle East outside Iran. His portraits, in a variety of poses—soldier, father figure with a small child, politician, or peasant—appear in every shop and office; his leading officials wear gold badges bearing his likeness; his picture is on the dial of the gold watches carried by army officers; his speeches fill the newspapers; and buildings and towns have been named or renamed after him. Saddam visits hospitals, markets, and other public places where he listens attentively to individual complaints and requests.

**Ba'thist Ideology: An Alternative to Fundamentalism**

Despite its secular tone, we believe that Ba'thist ideology is strong and well developed enough to offer stiff competition to the religious ideals of an Islamic revivalist movement. According to academic analysis, Ba'thist ideology has experienced a number of shifts under Saddam:

- In the late 1970s the Ba'thists broadened use of the term "Arab" from meaning only those who consider themselves Arab in language, feeling, and heritage to include all those descended from peoples living in ancient Mesopotamia. We believe that this move to link Arab, Kurd, and other minorities under the banner of Iraqi nationhood was an unsuccessful attempt to replace ethnic and religious factions with Arab nationalism.
- Since the Islamic revolution in Iran, Ba'thists have attempted to preempt religious criticism of their secular philosophy by placing more emphasis on



Islam—although keeping it subservient to Arab nationalism. According to Saddam's press releases, Ba'thists consider Islam an important, but not dominant, part of the Arab heritage. Moreover, Ba'thist goals of Arab unity, socialism, and modernization are precisely the same ideals embodied by the Prophet Muhammad.

**Backlash of the Iranian Revolution**

We believe that Iraqis have rallied around Saddam's regime in response to the war, the excesses and policies of the Iranian Islamic regime, and the traditional enmity between Arabs and Persians. In our opinion, few of Iraq's Shias consider Khomeini as a prophet speaking for them. Iraqis, according to press reporting, appear more willing to endure economic hardship than to conform to Khomeini's brand of Islamic fundamentalism, thus lessening the prospects that Iraqis will follow the Iranian revolutionary model.

*Cornerstones of Ba'thist Ideology*

*Unity*

*The eventual political union of all Arab states.*

*Freedom*

*Freedom from foreign control and influence. Freedom of the individual to participate in the social and political life of the nation, with limits set by the state.*

*Socialism*

*Government ownership of all large-scale industry, international trade, and financial institutions, and some retail trade, although it allows some private enterprise.*

*Arab Renaissance*

*Commitment to the material and spiritual revitalization of the Arab people along modern, progressive, secular lines.*

Saddam, through Baghdad radio and press releases, has tried to undermine Khomeini's potential appeal to Iraq's Shias. He has asserted that Khomeini is espousing a mistaken interpretation of Islam and has expressed hope that "Iran, on Khomeini's death, will resume the correct religious course." Saddam later inferred that only those who spoke Arabic—the language of the Koran—could adequately interpret and practice Islam.

*Outlook*

Despite the presence in Iraq of several economic, political, and social conditions that have set the stage for the rise of militant fundamentalist activity elsewhere in the Muslim world, we believe that Iraq's sectarian and ethnic differences and Saddam's effective suppression of all opposition limit prospects that a regime-threatening fundamentalist force will develop. We believe that, even if Saddam were replaced by a successor less skilled at controlling his opposition, increased fundamentalist activity would be prevented from coalescing into a countrywide movement by Iraq's sectarian and ethnic fragmentation.

We believe, however, that the course of the war could significantly alter the prospects for the rise of militant fundamentalism. Should a continued stalemate in the war or increased losses for Iraq aggravate economic conditions, or should the war end on terms unfavorable to Baghdad, we believe that an increasingly receptive audience for fundamentalist rhetoric would force the present regime or any successor to alter policies to appease its fundamentalist critics. Little change in the war or in economic conditions decreases the likelihood that major fundamentalist opposition will arise.

We believe that conditions within Iraqi society that are conducive to a religion-based revolution bear watching (see table). Particular attention should be paid to the possible emergence of a prophetic leader—which we believe is the key to the successful evolution of a religious movement—from either the Sunni or Shia religious establishments or opposition groups. If such a leader emerges, however, we would expect his constituency to be confined to either the Sunni or Shia communities and would not expect a groundswell of support to develop as it did for Khomeini in Iran.

*Implications for the United States*

Since we believe, barring an assassination and a takeover by its secular opponents, that Saddam and the Ba'thist regime will not fall victim to its Islamic fundamentalist opposition, we expect Iraq to maintain its diplomatic and economic links with the United States. If the war should end favorably for Iraq, we would expect little change in the religious policies of the Ba'thist regime and, in turn, perhaps a slight improvement in US-Iraq relations.   
 observers believe that Saddam will reestablish full diplomatic relations with the United States once the war is over. If the war should end unfavorably for Iraq, however, we expect that a stronger fundamentalist voice—an outgrowth of the conviction that the defeat was due to the regime's lack of religious fervor—would force the regime to develop a foreign policy even less friendly to Western secularist countries.

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**Common Preconditions for Islamic Resurgence**

Precondition	Presence or Absence in Iraq		Comment
	Present	Absent	
War	X		War with Iran, which began in 1980, has been stalemated for more than three years with no signs of speedy resolution. War has drained economy, hurt morale of population, and potentially increased receptivity to a fundamentalist movement.
Economic decline	X		Cost of war, damage to oil facilities, and declining oil prices have seriously impaired Iraq's economy. Oil exports are at one-fifth prewar levels, inflation is high, consumer goods are in short supply, and agricultural productivity is low.
Rapid urbanization	X		The urban percentage of Iraq's population increased from 36 percent in 1947 to 77 percent in 1980. Baghdad has grown from slightly more than 2 million in 1965 to approximately 3.4 million today. Its overcrowded slums, particularly in predominantly Shia areas, are potential breeding grounds for opposition—including fundamentalist—activity.
Presence of large numbers of foreigners	X		About 1.3 million foreigners currently in country include more than a million Egyptians. Foreign presence in key managerial, professional, and teaching positions creates resentment and contributes to xenophobia among Iraqis.
Rapid cultural change	X		Government policies have contributed to rapid cultural change already generated by urbanization and presence of large foreign communities—deemphasis of the extended family as primary social unit, emphasis on national rather than tribal loyalties, and liberalization of women's roles.
Secular government	X		Despite Saddam's efforts to equate goals of secular Ba'thist government with those of Islam, the government is still perceived by most fundamentalist elements as running counter to their interests.
Prophetic leader		X	We know of no charismatic religious leaders, Sunni or Shia, who could rally significant followings. Saddam has tried to prevent development of constituencies around religious leaders by building his own personality cult.
Homogeneous population		X	Iraq's population is 55 percent Shia, 25 percent Sunni Arab, 18 percent Sunni Kurd. Diverse population, including the roughly equal religious division, works against emergence of a prophetic religious leader or a movement that would appeal to all sectors of society, Shia as well as Sunni.

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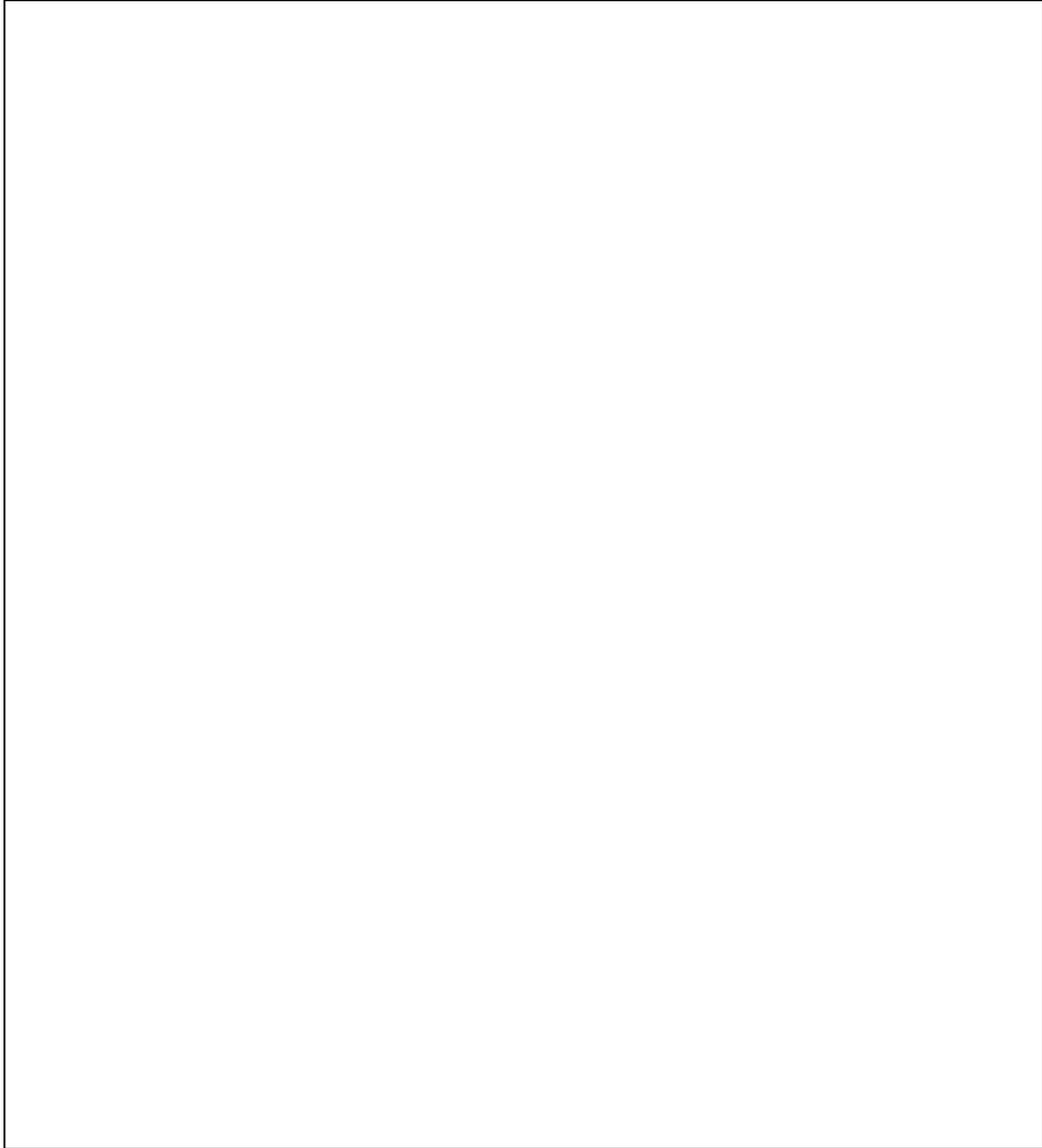
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Appendix



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