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The Dogma of State Violence: Saddam-Style

In the November 2, 2001, issue of Le Monde, Jean Baudrillard, responding to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, writes: “Terrorism is the act that restores an incredible singularity to the heart of a generalized system of exchange.” The singularity in question here is, of course, Islamic fundamentalism, now the only international singularity at war with transnational capitalism. Since coming to power in Iraq in 1976, Saddam Hussein, in much the same way, has transformed the single singularity of violence (executions, torture, terrorism, forcible relocation, among others) into the state’s most important dogma: a totalized order accountable to no one but himself.

Saddam’s conception of violence as state dogma goes back a long time. My purpose here is to focus on a small but significant part of it. From 1982 through 1988, Saddam organized, directed, and financed a systematic campaign of terror and extermination against the Kurdish minority in Iraqi Kurdistan. He called it Anfal, after a verse from the Koran calling upon Mohammed to “cast terror into the hearts of the infidels. Strike off their heads, strike off the very tips of their fingers.” The unbelievers

had to be killed, their villages and towns burnt, their properties confiscated, their women enslaved.

Saddam's resurrection, transformation, and, to a degree, distortion of Anfal 1,364 years later was intended to accomplish several goals: to reinvent himself as a Muslim large-scale violence against noncombatants; to reawaken the racist leader resolutely committed to serving the faith; to give religious justification to notion that non-Arabs, their conversion to Islam notwithstanding, generally harbor anti-Islam feelings; to transform the Muslim Kurds into an otherness hostile to "true" Islam and thus justify their obliteration by whatever means available. More important, Saddam hoped the successful end of the campaign would pave the way for him to emerge as the undisputed leader of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Saddam invested not just money and material in the campaign but also enlisted the help of many writers, poets, journalists, popular entertainers, and the enormous power of the state-controlled media.

By the time it was over, some 5000 villages had been leveled, an area one half the size of the state of New Jersey had been depopulated, its many orchards and virgin forests burnt to the last tree, its many fresh water springs shut under heavy layers of concrete and steel. To this day, some 180,000 people remain unaccounted for.

Perhaps the first question in the minds of many is what kind of state would engage in such massive and murderous brutality against a people, their way of life, and their environment; what kind of a state would bestow upon such a campaign some of the loftiest words imaginable, "heroic," "great," "just," "patriotic," "brave," and so forth. Totalitarianism easily comes to mind, but, as the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek has recently argued, today the term may not be all that an effective concept theoretically, as it

is often used to tame what he calls “free radicals” and discredit their emancipatory projects (1-3). Indeed in this post 9/11 environment, the term could easily backfire, turning thinking into what W.H. Auden called a matter of “filling up a social quiz” (391). Another term easily coming to mind is, of course, the Holocaust, but this term too, with its effort at delegitimizing other cruelties and functioning in Zizek’s words like some “sublime Evil,” can force upon Anfal such a dwarfish status that its content can never be felt.

What is needed here, in my judgment, is not a term but a brief description of how an ordinary citizen’s life can be subjected by the state to a series of calculated cruelties, which often culminate in painful, slow death. The description I have here is from a piece by Ewen MacAskill, diplomatic editor of the Guardian. MacAskill, relying on restricted Foreign Office documents, lists the following:

--More than 50 mental health patients were executed in place of prisoners with the means to bribe their way out.

--Eight prisoners were executed in October for defacing murals of Saddam Hussein.

--Thirty prostitutes were beheaded in a “clean-up” during the last month and their heads were left on the doorsteps of their homes.

--A man’s tongue was cut off in September under a new decree making slander of President an amputation crime. (1-3)

Anfal then comes from this generalized system of totalized state dogma that looks at the singularity of violence as something multiple, organized, and to some extent aestheticized, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin’s memorable phrase. MacAskill reports

that Watban Ibrahim al-Hassan, Saddam Hussein's cousin and current minister of the interior, has every execution videotaped, and, according to Iraqi National Congress, the tapes are housed in a special vault for the exclusive use of members of the so-called Revolutionary Command Council, who reportedly use the tapes to educate the rank and file of the ruling Arab Socialist Party about the nobleness of their cause. Party propaganda, as Kanan Makiya has documented in his award-winning Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World peaks of the Anfal campaign not something sinister that was done in the dark but rather as an elaborate national program that the whole nation should be proud of, identify with, and thank the leadership for making it happen (156-60). Rather than revealing its weight, the term conceals it. It is not death and destruction on a mammoth scale that it invokes; it is, rather, an accomplishment that only a state with a brilliant leadership can help bring about. Like the Gulag, the Anfal for the state is the site of a creative fulfillment. Schools, streets, landmarks, and at least one substantial oil well have been named Anfal.

Now, why this particular name was chosen for an operation designed to kill people because of their ethnicity, destroy their villages and their way of life, and confiscate their possessions? Surely other names had been considered, and surely the choice had been made after lengthy deliberations. Kanan Makiya is right on the mark when he says that this term served Saddam purpose perfectly. Being the eighth chapter of the Koran, Anfal bestowed upon the campaign God's blessing, thus, on the one hand, eliminating the need for "reasons" (159), and on the other, transforming Saddam's effort into a religious duty mandated by God himself. Saddam was now a true believer, and,

like the true believers of the seventh century Arabia, was engaged in a holy war against a people who had disobeyed God.

And what did Anfal prescribe as punishment for such disobedience? In the year A.D. 624 the Prophet Mohammed's army scored a major victory against a much bigger and far better equipped army of unbelievers at Badr. The al-Anfal chapter came to Mohammed to ratify the belief that divine intervention was behind the victory and to sanction the confiscation of enemy property, the livestock, the land, the grain stocks, even the people. As God made it clear, this was to be done without shame or embarrassment: "Enjoy therefore the good and lawful things which you have gained in war" By spelling out his war tactics, God also seemed to have sanctioned some of the most brutal forms of violence, unbelievers to be burned alive, terror to be struck into their hearts, their heads to be cut off, as well as their finger tips.

Saddam Hussein, then, saw in the Anfal chapter a singularity that could serve his interest in several ways. Since coming to power in 1976, Saddam Hussein had been resolute in trying to keep Islam away from politics. In speech after speech, he reminded the Iraqis that secularism was the country's path, and that religion had no role to play in the way his government was being run. "You have the freedom to pray," his deputy Taha Yaseen Ramadhan echoed his master at a speech in April 1979 at Baghdad University where I was finishing up an undergraduate degree, "but we will not allow you to usurp power in the name of Islam" (Sluglett 94). He described the punishment in as harsh a language as Anfal's. Islam was essentially depicted as a private matter of faith, not a vision of how a society was to be organized and run. Khomeini's Iran was seen not as a model but a danger to be avoided, and if need be confronted, at all cost. This was the

state's underlying message all through the war years with Iran (1981-88), and it was for this reason that Western governments, including the United States, began tilting decisively toward Saddam. The U.S. passed on to Saddam valuable intelligence information, along with generous credits to buy American agricultural products. The French went even as far as "loaning" him Exxocet-equipped Super Etendard strategic bombers.

The eight-year war was enormously costly for both countries, in both men and material, but neither side came out the winner, although for the Islamic Republic of Iran its survival in itself was seen as a sort of a victory. Not only did the regime not crumble, as Saddam had hoped, it actually came out a little stronger, as the war helped unite all Iranians against a foreign invader. What is more, the end of the war saw a more robust Iran still talking about its intention to export its brand of Islam to the neighboring countries. A much bigger disappointment for Saddam was the subsequent rise of political Islam in much of the Islamic world. Almost overnight, Saddam Hussein began reinventing himself as a devout himself, first decreeing that the words "God is Great" be added to the Iraqi flag, he then banned the public consumption of alcohol. Night after night, he was seen on state television engaged in worship.

Harnessing Islam's potential at the religious and political level was the immediate goal. The long-term goal, which by now had become fairly self-evident in Saddam's symbolic confrontations with the United States, was to remake Saddam as the undisputed Muslim leader who was not afraid to challenge America.

Anfal was a small arena where this strategy was tried out. Now Saddam was not fighting an Islamic country; he was engaged in eliminating the enemy of the faith. The

fact that the Kurds were fellow Muslims did not seem to matter much. The government could count on the silence, if not the approval, of fellow Arab governments, the Arab street, even the majority of Arab intellectuals, to do what it pleased with a non-Arab minority. Poet after poet, writer after writer, and journalist after journalist, including some of the famed ones—Muhammad Hasanin Haikal, Abdel-Rahman Munif, Mahmoud Darwish—gave Saddam their ideological backing. That silence, as Kanan Makiya points out so forcefully and passionately, went on to become a sort of politics in itself, a “bizarre state of affairs that allowed a Lebanese leftist (Trabulsi), a Jordanian newspaper editor (Khoury), a Tunisian historian (Djaiet), a Syrian literary critic (Abu Deeb), and a Palestinian human rights activist (Kuttab), all too meet under one umbrella in defense of “the rights” of a tyrant that not one of them would ever dream of living under” 324-25).

This new vocabulary of pan-Arabism, now repackaged as true Islam, gave Saddam’s stature a big boost among large sections of the Arab populace. Shaikh As’ad al-Tamimi, the leader of the Islamic Jihad movement in Jordan, described it as “a high point in the Islamic awakening.” Hisham Djaiet, Tunisia’s best-known intellectual, called it “the restoration of a deep identity” (both cited in Makiya 251, 242). And the late famed poet Nizar Qabbani, after a visit with Saddam wrote in 1984: “I came an atheist cursing the practices of the Arabs . . . only to find that Saddam Hussein gave me back my faith and tightened up my shattered nerves” (Makiya 49-50).

Although Islam was an important component in this new vocabulary adopted by Saddam, the biggest emphasis was placed on its racial content. Just as he did it with oil in the early 1970s, “Arab Oil for the Arabs,” now he did it with Islam. Islam’s so-called greatness was now attributed solely to the fact that it was founded by particular race in

whose language the Koran was written. To Saddam, this was the source of Arab pride. The Arabs needed to return to Islam because in it lay their greatness: a past that was both a source of pride and a model for the present, a past that was supposed to make an Arab feel whole again, as it did presumably Qabbani, a past that could put the Arab world once again on a path to greatness. This vocabulary worked like a gem, beaming its radiance on Arab minds everywhere. Finally, there was a leader who could rescue us, to paraphrase W. H. Auden, in “this hour of crisis and dismay,” of “expanding fear,” and make “action urgent and its nature clear” (Hynes, 12).

Hovering over the Anfal campaign was this newfound vocabulary, and it proved to be the tyranny’s best ally. It nullified Anfal as a cruelty all throughout the Arab world and beyond. During the cold war, one could still know what was happening behind the iron curtain because there was interest in the West in what the Russians and Romanians had to say. Even governments were concerned about their suffering. Anfal, by contrast, raised no eyebrows, inside or outside the Arab world. Outside the Arab world, of course, Western countries were not willing to sacrifice business interests in Iraq over a matter of little consequence. Inside the Arab world, Saddam’s newfound vocabulary proved so appealing that practically no journalist, no public figure, no writer, no artist would be willing to raise critical questions about the dictator’s conduct. The dictator for them was a new Saladdin in whom they saw real hope for restoring empire, unity, and greatness once more to the Arab nation. It is not that no Arab writer, journalist, or public figure knew what was happening to the Kurds. A great deal of information about the Anfal campaign was coming out. Saddam’s depiction of the campaign as a war against a non-

Arab enemy, that if not confronted would pose a serious threat to both Islam and Arab unity, was accepted at face value. For the Arab side the Kurds became less human. No sentimental language was developed about them, or what Richard Rorty has called “sentimental education,” the sort of education that “sufficiently acquaints people of different kinds with one another so that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human” (122-23).

Arab vocabulary since the Gulf War has become even more hostile to the Kurdish situation. Voices all across the Arab world and beyond now see in Saddam not a tyrant but a victim of an imperial aggression staged by the United States and Britain. Their intervention in March 1991 in the support of the Kurds, which eventually resulted in what is now called the Northern No-fly Zone, is seen as an act of conspiracy by hostile Western powers to dismember Iraq. Even the well-documented Saddam’s gassing of the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1986 is seen by many on the Arab side as Western fabrication, a charge repeated by a no less luminary than Edward W. Said.

Anfal, which is still of little interest to the world, provided Saddam Hussein with a perfect instant of meaning and gestures of solidarity from a diversity of sources. Nationalist and Islamic sentiment, which Saddam continues to use very effectively, shielded his actions at home from criticism and gave reason to a great many Arab and Islamic voices to rally to his support. The carnage, the pain, and all the killings and disappearances Saddam has left behind have added one more chapter to the history of a long-suffering people who continue to gaze passively, to adopt a phrase of the Nobel prize winning Wole Soyinka, at the “complacent conscience of the world” (xvi).

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