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## Atheism and the changing image of Islam in Iraq

Religion represents a powerful tool for controlling, shaping attitudes and frameworks in which society functions. Throughout history, the phenomenon of faith has occupied the minds of philosophers, theologians and countless other researchers. As an aftermath of analyses, observations of phenomena and comparisons of challenges in various corners of the world, many theories have been formed on religion itself, the origin of the need for worship and its impact on the formation of specific communities. The phenomenon of religion and belief in a higher being was also a major point in psychological and sociological research. Often, contradictory concepts or views of God were established, for example, the division of religion into authoritarian or humanistic by Erich Fromm (Fromm, 2017) or the static and dynamic classification of Henri Bergson (Bergson, 2002: 178-170). For some, religion will provide the basis of functioning, which defines the essence of being and gives meaning to actions, for others it is a myth, collective fantasy or tradition that affects everyday functioning.

Regardless of the primary motives which impact the emergence of polytheistic, monotheistic or henotheistic religions, their presence and development have influenced the historical fate and shape of today's geopolitical situation in the world. Inside various religious societies, there were also divisions and conflicts that led to the separation of subsequent groups, as exemplified by almost all major religions. History has brought forward many examples where religion, and alongside it, power, decided about and continue to control and govern communities. When those who negate the existence of God come into prominence and the clergy are accused of lying and manipulating people, many conflicts and hostilities arise.

Recent history of the Middle East provides examples of the challenging and dangerous path taken by apostates and atheists. In Muslim countries, the concept of God is an inseparable element of the lives of believers. It permeates all areas of everydayness, law, culture and art. Religion has impacted nearly every aspect of the formation of Muslim

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civilization. One of the best known and respected Arab thinkers and politicians, Ibn Khaldun, already in the 14th century, argued that power is the outturn of victory, and victory is the result of group solidarity and compliance in expressing demands. The union of hearts and the close merger are achieved only with the help of God to establish his religion (Bielawski, 2000: 107). Therefore, in countries where Islam is the supreme law or represents its source, atheists and apostates face persecution, imprisonment and even death. Although in the Qur'an there are references to tolerance for non-believers or even a statement that there is no compulsion in religion (The Qur'an 2017, 2: 256), the concept of rejecting God and the denial of his existence are treated by Muslims as blasphemy and an attempt to upset the community of believers. In Muslim literature and Arab media, the topic of atheism and apostasy is extensively negatively commented. There is a wealth of studies of Muslim law, fatwas, that deny this phenomenon and comments calling for the extermination of such people. Especially in recent years, when radical-minded groups have come to the fore, the situation for ex-Muslims has become exceptionally challenging.

Because of the lack of official data and statistics on non-believers, the majority of information can be derived from analyses run by human rights, anti-religious or secular organizations. Information about attacks on apostates and their arrests are increasingly penetrating the media. The trend of rejection of religion in Arab countries has been observed in recent years, but Iraq is indicated as the one where the number of those who reject the faith is developing at the most rapid pace.

### **The development and causes of atheism in Iraq**

One of the important events in recent decades in the history of the Middle East has been the war in Iraq and its consequences. In 2003, after the then government was overthrown by a coalition of Western troops, an attempt followed to implement administration and politics based on the Western model. A number of solutions from the law of democratic countries were reflected in the Iraqi constitution, but the religious factor to a large extent influenced the final shape of the country's legislative system. In the case of Iraq, a country highly diversified in terms of religion and ethnicity, Islam was recognized as the official religion and source of law (*The Constitution of the Republic of Iraq*, 2005). Approximately 55% of the population profess Shia Islam, while 40% are the followers of mainstream Sunni Islam. Among the Iraqis, there are also representatives of other religions such as Assyrians, Yazidis, Mandeans, Baha'is. There is a high number of ethnic groups. More than 70-75% are Arabs, Kurds constitute about 20%, but the country is also inhabited by Shabaks, Turkmen, Gypsies, Armenians and others (European Asylum Support Office, 2019). This religious and ethnic mosaic has led to a certain polarization of attitudes and views, but also tensions due to the preeminent role of Islam in shaping law and politics.

Of all the countries in the region, it is in Iraq that the role of religion has grown most significantly in the last two decades. Until 2003, the Sunni Ba'ath Party led by Saddam Hussein was in power. This was the moment when religion was initially not used in politics. The doctrines of secularism, pan-Arabism, and Arab socialism at that time, which were a pillar of the ruling party's programme, were not based on religion and religious law until the early 1990s. Only then did the Iraqi authorities gradually wake up to using mosques and madrasas to spread party and religious propaganda. At that time, the Faith Campaign was launched, aimed at combating secularization, introducing Sharia law and disseminating Saddam's vision of Islam among citizens (Helfont, 2018: 137-138). This was due, among other factors, to the growing Shiite power after the Iranian revolution and the increasingly stable position of their clergy in the region as well as in Iraq. The Iraqi authorities, striving to weaken the influence of Shiites on politics and create strong religious organizations that could threaten the current situation, took measures aimed at this environment. After the war with Iran (1980-1988) and Shia uprisings, the scale of the persecution of Shiites and their ayatollahs was enormous. Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, oppositionists were arrested and many eminent religious and political leaders were executed (Blaydes, 2018: 89-93).

In parallel to this, there were other organizations and political groups that represented various circles. Depending on the period and policy needs, they were tolerated or made illegal. The Iraqi Communist Party, which had its origins in the 1920s, or the Assyrian Democratic Movement fighting for the equality of rights and tolerance for the religious minority, were present on the political scene in Iraq. Perhaps this is the reason why the Iraqi law and many other political decisions were not religion-biased, as was the case with neighbouring countries of Iran or Saudi Arabia.

After the war of March 20, 2003 and during the occupation of the Western coalition troops, the authorities at the helm of the state changed completely. Removed from their positions, moderate Sunnis boycotted the 2005 elections to the parliament, which resulted in the acquisition of control over the state by the Shiites and Kurds, so far repressed by the previous government. Today, in the Iraqi parliament and government, there are representatives of non-Shiite groups, but it is the Shiite part of society and the clergy that still dominate the structures of power and administration and *de facto* constitute the mainstream of state and law policy. In the years 2005-2018, the most numerous party, Islamic Dawa Party, together with successive prime ministers dictated the internal and external policy of the country.

### **The wave of secularism and atheism in Iraq**

Iraqi society, and especially young citizens, are increasingly condemning the situation in the country, as Iraq has experienced extreme neglect and manipulation over the past 15 years at the highest levels of government. Since 2011, Iraqis have regularly come out

onto the streets and protested against government policies and the economic crisis. They refuse to use of religion for political or private purposes. The authorities are accused of nepotism and corruption (Transparency International, 2019), lack of social security, medical care, a huge increase in unemployment and tolerating the presence of dangerous military organizations based on religious doctrines. There is a growing opposition to Iran's open participation and influence on the state's internal policy, which has often resulted in attacks on Iranian representatives and buildings (Ibrahim, 2019).

One of the reasons for the growing aversion to politicians under the influence of clergy is the strengthening of social divisions according to religious and ethnic criteria. This led to a large split and constant tensions. The strong division between Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, and the marginalization of minorities, have contributed to mutual hostility also at the social and regional level. As of 2016, the new Law No. 3 on ID cards kept the old law that does not provide for the conversion of a Muslim, but assumes, in Article 26, that the children of a person who converts to Islam automatically become Muslim (Parliament of Iraq, 2016). This law is controversial, especially among Christians and Yazidis, who were often forced to convert to Islam by terrorists from Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014-2017 (*Iraq Passes Law Forcing Children to Convert to Religion of Muslim Parent*, 2015). Currently, a growing number of Iraqis are accusing the authorities of using religious arguments to weaken the Iraqi state and lead to unnecessary bloodshed. Example of this is the consent to the functioning of paramilitary militias associating Iraqi Shiites, which are famous for their brutality. In recent years, the League of Righteous in particular has been repeatedly accused of attacks, thefts and executions of Iraqi Sunnis (Human Rights Watch, 2016). It is alleged that some of these militia units are acting on the orders of the authorities or with their consent.

The change in approach to religion and its interpretation is also due to the emergence of dangerous, radical terrorist organizations. The ISIS, al-Qaeda or Ansar al Islam, along with their propaganda and brutal actions, led to the recognition of values and asking more and more questions about the existence of a God and whether his will is violence and death. The rules, laws and customs that were introduced in the areas controlled by radicals greatly influenced the daily life of the inhabitants. Since 2014, with the emergence of ISIS, laws were introduced locally which, based on the provisions of the Qur'an or Sunnah, and with simultaneous radical interpretation, became a dangerous tool of control. For the majority of Iraqi non-conservative Muslims, these new legal norms were at odds with their past lives and faith. For example, ISIS has banned women from accessing the public area, preventing them from working or studying at the University of Mosul on the grounds that the role of a woman is to be a mother and housekeeper (Erözden, 2015). A ban was introduced on listening to music, using social media and even playing sports. Children were deprived of access to education because subjects like literature, art, history, and philosophy were replaced with religious content (UNICEF, 2017: 4). Sectarian persecution and executions, torture and mutila-

tion of Iraqi people have become commonplace (Su, 2018). For many years, the scale of cruelty and the growing threat to followers of other religions or ethnic minorities have led to displacement, human trafficking, slavery and emigration both inside and outside the country (Tavernise, 2008). The brutalization of everyday life, the destruction of national and cultural heritage, and the disregard for human rights justified by religious law and the return to the principles of Islam of the 7th century, aroused extreme feelings among many Iraqis. The advent of Islamic radicals who use terror to impose their vision of Sunni Islam, and on the other hand, the Shiite power, which divides citizens and favours supporters of their doctrine, caused waves of protests and an increasing rebellion against the presence of religion and its rights in political and social life.

### Seeking answers

Leonard Hobhouse, a famous British sociologist at the turn of the 20th century, rightly noted in his book *Liberalism* (1911) that no man will ever be free if he is controlled by another. He will only be liberated if he obeys the laws that are binding on the whole community (Hobhouse, 2020: 10). That said, the author emphasizes that this freedom is possible only when the established law does not harm citizens and does not give authoritarian power to certain social or political groups. Nowadays, in societies, mainly from the circle of Western culture, which have gone through the path of religious, political and industrial reforms, this is accepted. However, in many other communities where power is still authoritarian or religious, this view is not entirely applicable. In the quest for scientific answers and new ideas, especially young Iraqis are turning to studies by Western researchers and atheists such as Michel Foucault, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, or the Iraqi activist Faisal Saeed Al Mutar.

The Internet and its resources and local assemblies are the only form of expression and seeking answers to besetting questions. In a country where Islamic terrorists have controlled hundreds of thousands of kilometers and indoctrinated people for years, it is very dangerous to disclose one's views. At the same time, a government that bases its policy on the recommendations of clergy who do not recognize mercy for apostates poses a major threat to critics of religion.

The increasingly strong influence of secularism and atheism on Iraqis, not only living in Iraq, but also in exile, is reflected in the existence of numerous organizations, atheist websites and online forums on social networks from around the world. Among them is the Canadian organization Atheist Republic or Ex-Muslims of North America, which promote secular values and strive to combat discrimination against former Muslims. Due to the situation in Iraq and the lack of universal consent to preach atheism or apostasy, Iraqis cannot officially form open organizations, therefore, they mainly establish social groups on Facebook or Twitter. Those include: Iraqi Atheists a group whose goal is spreading the thoughts of enlightenment, lifting religious restrictions and lead-

ing a peaceful life without wars and killing, and others similar Iraqi Atheists and Irreligious Society, Iraqi Atheist or Iraqi Atheist Youth. There are also private groups that are not open to everyone, such as Atheists are unique. At the same time, groups that support non-religious power, such as the Secular Iraqis, who are currently followed by around 75,000 people, have been developing intensely.

The content posted on these sites conveys various messages. Some encourage the study of philosophical, scientific and sociological literature, while others focus on satire and parody intended to ridicule religion and spirituality, irrespective of faith. Many groups established in virtual space or such gathering in cafes and bookstores in Iraqi cities are secret for fear of surveillance. Lists of participants or their contact details are hidden (Mamouri, 2014). Many other groups on social networking sites that have declared secularism or atheism in their foundations are no longer active, often since months or years. The main reason for this is the threat posed by public disclosure of one's views. In Iraq, as in many other Muslim countries, there are special institutions looking for and arresting people who do not agree with the line of the state.

Calling for the secularization of the state, removing clerical influence from politics and prohibition to create laws based on religious principles have been the slogans of protesters in the streets of large cities and those who gather around various organizations for years. In 2017, the Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies conducted extensive research among citizens. Iraqis were asked who they would vote for in the next elections to secure the future of themselves and their country. More than 48% of the 2,300 respondents chose technocrats or secular candidates, and less than 15% declared their support for people supported by religious authorities (Saget, Moftin, Al-Hamoud, 2017: 32). These results only confirm that the current model of state, often forced against social expectations and based on the principles of religious doctrines, is failing.

Iraqi youth who most often criticize Islam and its influence on political decisions and consent to violence resulting from religious differences do not always admit to atheism but more often to fighting for a secular state. The rejection of religion arises precisely from political, not religious reasons (Hamid, 2018).

### **Iraqi law and atheism**

Iraqi atheists and apostates are forced to associate or seek information away from the surrounding environment or even their families, because the situation in the country does not guarantee their safety. There are three elements that influence the situation of non-believers: society, state law, and religious law. Although civil law does not impose any punishments on atheists, in Muslim law, apostasy, departing from Islam, is punishable by death, especially in the case of adult men. In the public awareness, denial of God should be punished, and therefore, lynch law often applies. Atheists, aware of the danger, hide their views and agree to fast alongside believers during fasting, while women,

against their will, wear a hijab in public places (Glover, 2019; *Atheists prefer not to profess their religious convictions in Iraq*, 2019).

The current constitution of 2005 and many other legal and administrative solutions were created on the basis of the previous Iraqi documents, taking into account democratic principles. The most important finding in the context of atheists and other religious minorities is that no law can be made against Muslim law, Sharia (*The Constitution of the Republic of Iraq*, 2005, Art. 2, sec.1). This provision largely regulates the shape of the law in the country, but also its interpretation. It is not uncommon that precisely the element of religious law constitutes the starting point for accusations of apostasy, heresy or blasphemy. Article 2 of the Constitution guarantees Muslim identity of the majority of Iraqis and full rights to all individuals to freedom of religion and its practice, i.e. Christians, Yazidis, Mandeans, etc. As in other laws, nothing is mentioned about atheists or Baha'is. An important argument for non-believers or people with different views than the majority of society is the provision in Article 14 of the Constitution. It assumes that the Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on sex, race, ethnicity, origin, colour, faith, opinion, and economic and social status (*The Constitution of the Republic of Iraq*, 2005, Art. 14).

Based on the above provisions, atheists and apostates demand equality, tolerance and the assurance of their safety. They indicate that the most important law gives them freedom of thought and belief. That said, due to the nature of the state and religion in Iraq, there is a serious clash between secular and religious law.

In reality, non-believers, even though they can be 'pushed into' the concept of people with different views, are repressed. This stems from the lack of precise provisions and a certain freedom in interpreting the law by judges. Atheists point out that the modern Penal Code (1969), which was updated and amended in 2011, is general enough to be used against atheists or apostates. One example of this is Article 372, where it is specified that those who offend religion will be fined or imprisoned for up to three years. Anyone who, according to paragraphs 4 and 5, prints holy books, where a text has been misspelled to change the content of the teaching of a given religion, or who publicly offends or ridicules a symbol or a person who is the object of sanctification, worship for a religious group, can be judged (*Penal Code No. 111*, 1969, Art. 372). Undermining the truthfulness of the holy books, regardless of whether they concern Christianity, Judaism or Islam, or criticizing, for example, Sunna and the life of the prophets and their conduct, is considered blasphemy, which is punishable by imprisonment.

Nowadays, many messages also come from politicians or clergy, who see secularists and atheists as enemies of the state and traitors to God. More and more often in the media there are statements calling for the pursuit of such people and punishing them (Jabar, 2018). Iraqi authorities and the Muslim clergy recognize such individuals as frustrated people who use Western ideas to destabilize the society and its culture. They are perceived as heralds of the sexual revolution and the destruction of tradition.

In Iraq, in recent years, several cases have been publicized in which various people have been brutally treated by the police and the closest neighbourhood. In 2012, Hamin Ary, the editor of the newspaper *Chirpa* in Erbil, he was arrested after reprinting a text by Kurdish writer Goran Halmat. On the basis of the aforementioned Article 372, it was concluded that there had been offenses and violations of religious sensitivity. Local circles called it blasphemy (Reporters Without Borders, 2016) and demands for stricter laws to prevent hostile action against religions were made (Gee, 2012). In the same city in 2013, fifteen-year-old Ahmed Sherwan confessed to his father that he was an atheist, as a result of which he was arrested and tortured. He spent several days in prison (Rozh, 2014). In 2015, in Karbala, Worood Zuhair was beat by her brother and imprisoned at home when she had openly denied faith in God (Tarzi, 2019). In April 2018, four men were arrested in southern Iraq on charges of promoting the idea that there is no God and to spread atheism (Al-Jaffal, 2018). In May 2020, in the Qadisiyyah province, pursuant to Article 372 of the Criminal Code, a doctor was sentenced to two years for promoting atheism and insulting the prophet (High Judicial Court, 2020).

On the basis of interviews in the Arabic or English-language press and in reports of organizations fighting for human rights, it turned out that Iraqi Kurdistan has the highest number of atheism supporters. This is facilitated by a large number of scientific and cultural centres, as well as the presence of many foreign and economic institutions. At the same time, many new legal solutions and administrative decisions are responding to social needs. In 2008, the marriage law was changed. The Act No. 15 of 2008 to Amend the Amended Law No. 188 of 1959, Personal Status Law, in Iraq Kurdistan Region, equal rights were introduced in many matters and the provisions regarding the prohibition of marriage between Muslim women and dissenters disappeared (but is still prohibited by religious law) (Parliament of Kurdistan-Iraq, 2008). Another important document is Act No. 8 of 2011 (Act of Combating Domestic Violence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq), whose task is to protect victims of violence, combat female genital mutilation or provide legal assistance to those in need (Parliament of Kurdistan-Iraq, 2011). In the context of religion, the Kurdish authorities also approved the law on ethnic and religious minorities (Law No. 5 of 2015 on Protection of the Right of Components), guaranteeing them equal rights within their autonomy. According to Article 1(2), Turkmen, Christians, Yazidis, Mandeans, Shabaks, Sabeans, Faili Kurds, Zoroastrians and others mentioned in the document have, inter alia, the right to protection, freedom of religion and preservation of places of worship (a similar law has been in force in Iraq since 2016) (Parliament of Kurdistan-Iraq, 2015). The effect of this law is the emergence of numerous representative offices for religions in the Kurdish government. Atheists have not been taken into account, which unfortunately results in a lack of protection. Of significance is also Iraqi law, as it requires providing a religion when a child is born. Until recently, there were only four options to choose from: Christian, Muslim, Mandaean and Yazidi

(now there are more options). Failure to indicate religion resulted in the inability to receive personal documents, register marriages, be employed, etc.

In the years when terrorist organizations controlled large areas of Iraq, even more drastic penalties were imposed. ISIS based its principles of law on primary Muslim law. They were punished with death for blasphemy against God and Islam, by stoning for marital treason, by death for homosexuality, by cutting off a hand for theft, and with 80 lashes for drinking alcohol or for defamation. Death penalty was imposed for recognizing somebody as a spy for the infidels or an apostate (Shiloach, 2014). This model exists to this day in several countries, but Iraqi law does not recognize it.

Since 2005, the growing influence of religion on legal changes and the forcing of often controversial proposals contrary to the spirit of democracy have led to a stronger opposition to the presence of clergy in politics. Secularists and atheists are weary of the presence of religion in every part of life and disregarding women's rights. An example is the repeated pushing for the amendment of the Personal Status Law of 1959, aimed at limiting women's rights to work and property, as well as lowering the age of marriage (Ali, 2017). They are opposed to political games with the use of and under the threat of God, as well as corruption and nepotism of authorities that still rely on religion. The scale of cruelty by terrorist organizations such as ISIS, which was visible in 2014-2017, justified by God's will, is unacceptable to them. Contemporary research and statistics, which are still not very reliable and precise, indicate a continuous increase in atheism among Iraqis, which is unfortunately accompanied by a simultaneous growth in religious fundamentalism. One of the researchers of Islam, Ghaith Al-Tamimi, who was a staunch opponent of other religious groups years ago and currently runs an organization for interreligious dialogue, confirms this situation. He believes that the revolution and the wave of atheism are the outturn of access to technology and the media, which promotes freedom of speech and fearless spread of often controversial opinions. He also emphasizes that clergymen have failed as mediators during social and political crises, and mentions that the criminal activities of jihadist groups and militia, justified by religious texts, have caused a rebellion and a search for answers as to whether the crimes against people are rightly motivated by religion (Hamid, 2018).

## Conclusions

Many things are changing in Iraq today, which have led to a considerable polarization of attitudes and the intensification of activities of various social and political groups. The seizure of power and the creation of laws by politicians who are submissive to Shiite doctrine and the clergy are causing concern among citizens. That said, the most outrageous is radicalization of the law, which aims to restore principles inadequate to contemporary norms requiring respect for human rights and freedom of speech.

Concluding the factors influencing the growth of supporters of atheism and apostasy, it should be stressed that the state legislative system is not the biggest obstacle for non-believing citizens. It is, actually, the human and cultural factor in the form of social beliefs, radicalization of religious views stemming from interfaith conflicts and the deteriorating situation of security, economy and internal politics. The greatest enemy of the regulation of social relations and within religious groups is a different interpretation of Muslim law and locally rooted traditions that support conservative attitudes.

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to present the situation of atheists and apostates in Iraq, as the tendency to abandon religion is increasing in this country. With the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein and his party, Shiites took power in the country, who, guided by religious doctrine, often limit the freedoms and rights of citizens. In addition, the authorities in the country still maintain a policy of ethnic and religious divisions towards citizens, which leads to social conflicts. Another dangerous factor is the emergence of religious terrorist organizations and private militias that persecute dissenters. Although atheism is not punished by state law, many people who deny God's existence are arrested or killed. The only safe places for them are secret meetings or a virtual space where they can discuss and seek answers to their doubts.

**Keywords:** Iraq, atheism, apostate, Islam, religion, law

Article submitted: 29.09.2020; article accepted: 20.10.2020.