

The Rifā‘iyya in 20th century Iraq

The Role of Sufi Genealogies and Veneration of Saints in Iraqi Political History

Head: Prof. Dr. Thomas Eich

Research Fellow: David Jordan, M.A.

Funding: Fritz Thyssen Stiftung

Duration: 2013-2016

Abstract

The proposed project investigates the history of the Rifā‘iyya brotherhood in 20th century Iraq with a focus on the country’s political history. Two observations constitute the starting points of the project. First: the political elites, who influenced Iraqi history for a long time in the 20th century, belonged mainly to the Rifā‘i family. This is true not only for the Iraqi officer corps that was dominated by Rifā‘is at the latest since the 1950s, but also for the Ba‘ṭ party whose cadre consisted mainly of Rifā‘is, too, since the 1970s. In addition our preliminary investigation shows that the Ba‘ṭ leadership took advantage of their claimed šarīfian descent (nasab) from Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī and the prophet Muḥammad to legitimize their rule right from the beginning in 1968. Second: The Sunni Rifā‘iyya shows an important and specific closeness to the Šī‘a, which can be traced back to the 19th century and which is related to genealogies, doctrine, and joint ritual performances. With this closeness the Rifā‘iyya offers a frame to reconcile Sunni-Šī‘i differences what gained at least one time, i.e. during the anti-British revolt in 1920, political importance in the Iraqi history of the 20th century.

The project advances the hypothesis, that there existed social ties and ideational relationships between the representatives of the Rifā‘iyya and the bearers of secular ideologies in Iraq during the 20th century. It has to be assumed that these relations varied in strength over time. The project seeks to analyse and explain this change in strength of relations.

Three aspects will be investigated. First, a diachronic investigation of the Rifā‘iyya family networks will be conducted for a better understanding of the associations and dissociations in the fields of “religious specialists” and “military”. Second, the writings of Rifā‘is will be analysed focussing on topics with reference to Islam. Due to the prevailing secularization paradigm in the research on Iraq, previous investigations of the Ba‘ṭ rule always ignored such writings (even if the authors were members of the Ba‘ṭ cadre themselves). According to this paradigm the Ba‘ṭ and especially Ṣaddām Ḥusayn referred to religious aspects (i.e. the

descent claim from the prophet) just for instrumental purposes as a reaction to political crises. It was widely assumed that such claims were only fabricated in the 1980s and 1990s and could not generate any legitimacy among the Iraqi population at all. According to the project's preliminary investigations this model of explanation lost its plausibility and a more differentiating model needs to be worked out through a systematic analysis of sources of the Iraqi Rifā'iyya with reference to Islam. Third, the rituals of the Rifā'iyya will be investigated. Poems and litanies of the brotherhood will be analysed as well as the presentation in Iraqi newspapers of rituals performed by Rifā'is and Šī'is with a special focus on joint Sunni-Šī'i performances of these rituals.

Programme:

The project investigates the period from the beginning of the anti-British revolt in 1919 until 2013 and is chronologically subdivided into two parts:

- a) The role of the Rifā'iyya and her traditional poetry during anti-British revolts in 1919 and 1920 in view of the Rifā'iyya's history in the late Ottoman Empire (Prof. Dr. Thomas Eich).
- b) The history of Rifā'is in leading political positions and the Rifā'iyya from the beginning of the Iraqi nation state 1921 to 2013 with a special focus on the Ba'ṭ (1968-2003) and post-Ba'ṭ (2003-2013) eras (David Jordan).