

“Iraq had a violent and unstable political culture before Saddam, and a stability bolstered by repression, fear, and wealth under Saddam. Could history repeat itself in Iraq? Could the country produce another Saddam-like figure by replicating the conditions and circumstances that propelled him to power?”

Iraq Before and After Saddam

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Consider Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein. It is a country that once profited from its great oil wealth and talented, skilled, and well-educated people, but is now devastated by years of war and economic sanctions. It is a country that once was self-sufficient in agriculture and proud of its modern health and education systems, but is now unable to school its children or treat all its sick. It once had a Western-looking, secular outlook, with 22 universities that trained scientists, engineers, doctors, and scholars, but now can barely keep its schools open more than four hours a day. It was the capital of the Arab-Islamic empire during the Golden Age of the Abbasids, when Arab culture, science, medicine, literature, mathematics, and philosophy flourished from the eighth to the thirteenth century. Today members of the country's impoverished middle class sell their books for bread while watching a new class of the instantly rich enjoy wealth bestowed by corruption and greed and the very sanctions meant to topple them. Iraq could have been a model for the more equitable distribution of resources to its people in a region known for its profligate spending; instead, it became a model for a republic of fear, a *mukhabarat* (police) state where knowledge is a dangerous commodity and politics is defined by the cult of personality.

Now consider Iraq's ruler, Saddam Hussein. He has been accused of many things. He has been called a thug, a genocidal killer, a repressor of his

people, the ultimate in evil. Saddam believes he is the light of the Arabs, the sword of Islam, the shaykh of shaykhs, the father of Iraq, the commander of the faithful. He is a hero to the Arab street, the generous benefactor of the poor and the oppressed, the only Arab leader to stand up to the West and the United States and survive. He is Hammurabi and Salah al-Din, the hero of al-Qadisiyyah and of the Mother of All Battles.¹

And he is popular. Unlike most candidates for reelection in democratic republics, he improved his 1995 electoral victory in which he took 99.96 percent of the vote to 100 percent in 2002, a feat no American president has accomplished. What Saddam has not been called is a leader with a world-view. Yet he does have one, which sees Iraq as the center and savior of the Arab world and views everyone else with deep suspicion. It is that vision that has made him such a frightening figure—demonic to most, evil genius to some, hero to a few.

Many qualities are ascribed to Saddam, ranging from ruthless, evil, and cunning to pragmatic, risk taking, and decisive. He deplores corruption and yet is surrounded by it. He envisions country and party as superseding ethnic and religious ties but, in the end, the only loyalty is that due Saddam. That he is clever, manipulative, and daring there is no question. He is a complex figure whose life and behavior have been shaped by history, by tribal culture and tradition, by family values, and by a driving ambition to lead, control, and shape Iraq and Arab destiny. In any individual, this would be a potent drink. In Saddam it became a deadly mix.

The key question, however, is not simply how Saddam has stayed in power or made Iraq in his image. Rather, it is important to distinguish what elements of Iraqi and Arab culture shaped Saddam and to think about what that may mean for Iraq after Saddam. Iraq had a violent and unstable polit-

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¹The Arabs defeated the Persians in the Battle of Qadisiyyah in 637 C.E. and brought Iraq from Persian control into the new Arab-Islamic empire.

ical culture before Saddam, and a stability bolstered by repression, fear, and wealth under Saddam. Could history repeat itself in Iraq? Could the country produce another Saddam-like figure by replicating the conditions and circumstances that propelled him to power? What historical factors shaped Saddam's thinking—and could shape his successor's as well?

CREATING SADDAM . . .

In the three decades he has ruled Iraq, through revolutions, abortive coups, wars, and UN-imposed sanctions intended to deny him absolute authority over all Iraq, Saddam has survived by using two "tools": the cult of personality and the art of reinventing himself and Iraq.

Saddam Hussein is the product of a dysfunctional family in a small village and a society dominated by tribalism and a patriarchal culture. He reflects the tribal characteristics of honor, manliness, and loyalty to family, clan, and tribe. He has used these qualities to win loyalty to himself as the republican shaykh, the essential Iraqi. But he also uses these tribal characteristics to rule as tribal godfather, the dispenser of wisdom, justice, wealth, and punishment.

If Saddam did not invent the violence and oppression common in his republic of fear, he did refine the methodology, increasing in scope and quality the practices of violence and terror. In the more than 30 years he has ruled Iraq, Saddam has winnowed out all rivals for power, influence, and authority—from the political theoreticians and military members of the ruling coalition to any prominent figure with the potential to attract admirers or establish an alternative power base in the party, the military, or the state. Senior military officers and party officials were gunned down in Iraq and in foreign countries or sent into exile as the ambassador to Moscow or a country in Scandinavia. Bigger prisons were built to accommodate larger numbers of political prisoners while Jews and communists were hanged from lampposts in Liberation Square to remind Iraqis of the dangers of dual loyalties or nationalities.

Saddam began his own political career with an assassination attempt in October 1959 on Iraq's leader, Abd al-Karim Qassim. He played the role of security thug and enforcer from the time he joined the nascent Baath Party in the early 1950s through the 1960s, when as chief of the party's underground

²Founded in Syria in the 1940s, the Arab Baath (Renaissance) Party had a secular outlook based on a theory of Arab unity and nationalism and a vague mix of economic and social justice. The Iraq branch was established in 1951 by a young Shia engineer from Nasiriyya.

apparat, he worked behind the scenes to help bring his kinsman, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, and the military wing of the Baath Party to power.² Saddam himself came to power under the leadership of Bakr, who was secretary general of the party and head of the Revolutionary Command Council. Saddam's loyalty to Bakr was rewarded in 1969 when Bakr named him vice president and security chief, making Saddam the second most powerful force in Iraq. By 1973 he overshadowed his mentor. In 1979 Saddam removed Bakr, along with many senior party members and military officers, many of whom had helped bring him to power.

Saddam is not an ideologue or a theoretician. He acts on instinct and will. If he has any political philosophy, it is wrapped around a mix of Arabist and nationalist themes, including the Iraq First Movement, which was a mixture of nationalism, Arabism, and anticolonialist/anti-British sentiment; pan-Arabism as preached by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser and as practiced by personal rival Hafiz al-Assad, who ruled Syria until his death in June 2000; and the Baath Party's slogans of secularism, pan-Arabism, and economic and social justice. In Saddam's hands, these became distorted by his vision of Iraq's primacy, Islamic and tribal values, and his special role in the party and the state. Baathist goals became entwined with other Saddam inventions—his new version of Iraqi nationalism and the concept of the "new Iraqi man" (and woman). Arab or Kurd, Sunni or Shia, communist or monarchist, Saddam aimed to fashion a supernationalism tailored to fit his aspiration to unite all in what was essentially a pan-Sunni Arabism.

. . . AND REINVENTING IRAQ

In the decade between the 1958 revolution, which ended the monarchy, and the July 30, 1968 coup, which brought the Baath Party to power, Iraq experienced four successful coups and a dozen abortive ones. To Saddam and others in the new regime, the lessons of that period showed that power based solely on the military, party bureaucrats, or government civil servants would not succeed. (In its early years, the party had members who were military officers, and party functionaries held high positions in the government and security services.)

In 1979 all this changed. Films of the unprecedented party congress called into session that summer show Saddam, resplendent in a tailored suit with a Cuban cigar, weeping as close associates, party members, government officials, and military officers are accused of crimes against the state—

including plotting a coup with Syria. They arise, confess their sins, and are led out to be shot by brother party members, government officials, and military officers. Saddam announces that the aging president, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, who is retiring because of ill health, has asked him to become president. The show is over.

Once openly and clearly in power, Saddam abandoned all pretense of honoring Baathist theory, pan-Arab sympathies, or the new and noble Iraqi personae he had created. Instead, Saddam began a series of reinventions intended to keep him in power and Iraq in confusion.

In his first reinvention, Saddam created a new Baath Party purged of its intellectuals, leftists, and military heroes. Unlike the original urban-based members who joined the Baath Party in the 1950s and 1960s, Bakr, Saddam, and the new Baathist elite that controlled the party after the 1968 coup came almost entirely from provincial, semi-bedouin small towns and villages where tribal and family loyalties were and still are strongest. They formed a new kind of party loyalist who owed his education, position, and wealth to his standing in the party apparatus and proven loyalty to Saddam.

At the same time, Saddam began mobilizing clan and family networks into the military and security services, giving them control of the institutions of coercion, violence, and terror. Members of Saddam's tribe (the Albu Nasir) and clan (the Bayjat) were given preference in joining the sensitive security units—as bodyguards to the inner circle of the regime and to Saddam and his family, and as protectors of special sites and programs (such as those for development of weapons of mass destruction). Tribes closely related to Saddam's clan—the Dulaym, Dur, Jabbur, and Ubayd—were recruited for the Republican Guards, the Special Republican Guards, the

bodyguard units, intelligence and security units in the military and the party, the Baghdad garrison, and the Defense Ministry. They replaced non-Tikritis, non-Baathist military leaders, and party ideologues of dubious loyalty.

The next reinvention was evident by the early 1980s. Close family members were given senior posts, including Saddam's half-brothers—Barzan, Sibawi, and Watban—and his al-Majid cousins from his father's family. By the mid- to late 1980s, members of Saddam's family and tribe dominated all areas critical to Saddam's power.³ And by the early 1990s, Saddam's family policy had brought in sons Qusay and Uday. Qusay today controls the intelligence and security forces, including the Special Republican Guards, and many Iraqis believe Saddam has chosen him as his successor.

The tribes were Saddam's final reinvention. In the 1970s, Saddam seemed to spurn all things tribal as reactionary and irrelevant to a modern Westward-looking Iraq. In 1976 he banned the use of tribal names—al-Tikriti, al-Dulaymi, al-Duri, for example—mostly to mask the number of clan and family members in government but also to demonstrate the more cosmopolitan culture he was creating. Saddam, however, also established a

Committee of the Tribes to work among tribes in Iraq's Sunni Arab region while he became the patriarch, the dispenser of power, and the source of all influence in the party, the tribe, and the state. He returned authority to traditional tribal chiefs and leaders, especially outside the large cities and in the more isolated south and west in the mid-1990s, when internal law and order collapsed and threatened his control.

Saddam's political philosophy was probably best expressed in a speech he gave in summer 2000, commemorating the end of the Iraq–Iran War. He criticized “those rulers and kings who have sold out their souls and appointed [the occupying foreigner] to rule over everything that is dear and precious in the values and wealth of their people.” Saddam warned Iraqis “not to provoke a snake before you make up your mind and muster up the ability to cut off its head,” and in vintage Saddam style told Iraqis, “Do not give your enemy any chance to get the upper hand of you. . . . Do not exaggerate a promise you cannot fulfill or a threat your ability cannot support. . . . Keep your eyes on your enemy. Be ahead of him but do not let him be far behind your back.”

One outcome seems certain. Most Iraqis will probably abandon Saddam quickly when they see war coming.

³Half-brother Barzan was intelligence minister and chief security thug for several years after the revolution, a position later held by his other half-brothers, Sibawi and Watban. Cousins Adnan Khayrallah Talfah and Ali Hasan al-Majid (known as “Chemical Ali” for his use of chemical weapons in the Kurdish repression of 1988) each served as defense minister. Cousins Hussein and Saddam Kamil and Ali Hasan al-Majid would run the first circle of protection around Saddam, including intelligence, security, and the all-important Ministry of Industry and Military Industrialization (MIMI). Until his defection in 1995, Saddam's cousin and son-in-law Hussein Kamil headed MIMI, which was responsible for developing programs for weapons of mass destruction.

WAITING IN THE WINGS

As the United States prepares for a military confrontation with Iraq, several questions emerge regarding a successor to Saddam. Will it—indeed should it—be a strongman, a proven leader who represents the same power base, background, and interests that were Saddam's and therefore could keep the country's diverse religious, ethnic, and tribal groups under central control? Or should it be a coalition comprised proportionally of the elements that make up Iraq, regardless of its political views or acceptability to Iraqis? Is a coalition of the exiles and the "stay at homes" possible in a country that has never tolerated coalitions? Should the United States look for a Sunni Arab general from Tikrit, because only the center and the military can replace Saddam? Or should it avoid a general, because any regime survivor is as guilty of war crimes, repression, and terror as was Saddam? Some argue that Iraqis are incapable of self-rule, that they need a strongman, someone like Saddam, if the country is to stay unified and if the Shia—tools of Iran—and the Kurds—always quarrelsome—are to be kept in line.⁴ Others see Iraqis as the region's foremost democrats, and the new Iraq as a model of democratic emulation for the region. This "choice" will be more difficult and more important for the United States, Iraq, and its neighbors than the imminent military attack.

It is impossible to gauge the views of Iraqis inside Iraq. They probably ask, What opposition? The exiles sitting in London, Paris, Amman? Not one of them has been in Iraq in 20 years or more and, except for Ahmad Chalabi, head of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), no one knows their names. Who are Saddam's opponents? They represent the complex mix that is Iraq: Sunnis and Shias, generals and clerics, people who are religious or secular, Arabs who are tribal and Arabs who are not, Kurds who are Sunnis or Shia or maybe even Jews, Turkmen and Assyrians—even a cousin of the king who was murdered in 1958. Where are they? The cities mentioned previously, and Damascus when permitted; where they are not is Baghdad. As vociferous as they are, virtually all the failed coup attempts reported over the past 11 years were led

by prominent tribal leaders and senior military officers from important tribes and families like the Jaburis and Dulaymis. Not clear is their motivation: was it because a general was sent home dead or because of property stolen by Saddam's greedy son, Uday, or Uday's womanizing?

While many of the estimated 3 million Iraqis living in exile support efforts to remove Saddam, they refuse to coalesce under the banner of the INC. Evaluating activist dissidents' claims of connections to or supporters in Iraq is impossible. Indeed, with the exception of a small number of representatives of well-known traditional families, few are known or respected in Iraq. United States efforts to reinvigorate the exiled opponents to Saddam have met with mixed results. Recriminations over past "betrayals"—from the Kurdish parties, the Shia who rebelled in 1991, and the INC—have masked the inability of the groups to work together.

Saddam's opponents share three characteristics. First, all promise democratic, transparent, accountable, inclusive governance based on a broad coalition of the ethnic, political, and sectarian elements that comprise Iraq. The largest group is the INC, which represented Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish factions from its inception in 1992 through 1996. (In 1996, Kurdish Democratic Party leader Masud Barzani invited Baghdad to enter the forbidden zone of northern Iraq to help him suppress his Kurdish rival, Jalal Talabani. Saddam responded by entering Irbil, the Kurds' capital, and sweeping up members of the INC and other dissident factions.) Iraqi National Congress members are having difficulty agreeing with other oppositionists on electing a governing council, writing a constitution, defining citizenship and federalism, determining the basis for representation, and most important, whether they should declare themselves a government in exile, and deciding who would lead that government.

The Kurds, centered in the three northern governates protected by Operation Northern Watch, are represented by two major factions: the Masud Barzani-led Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Jalal Talabani-led Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).⁵ The majority of the population that is Shia is partly represented by the Iran-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The small Turkmen, Assyrian, and Christian communities—less than 10 percent of the population of Iraq—are present uncomfortably in the broader Kurdish movement. The Iraqi National Accord, led by Shiite Ayad Alawi, a former general and a Baath Party refugee, along with other once-prominent

⁴Shia Arabs comprise approximately 60 percent of Iraq's population of 23 million, Kurds 20 percent, and Arab Sunnis—Saddam's main support group—over 17 percent. The Kurds are predominantly Sunni with a small number of Shia.

⁵Operation Northern Watch—originally Operation Provide Comfort—was created in 1991 to monitor any threatening Iraqi military moves. Iraq is forbidden to enter the no-fly, no-drive zone, which includes the area north of the 36th parallel.

military and political defectors, will demand their share of the pie as well.

Second, Saddam's opponents in exile are divided by leadership rivalries, disagreements over tactics, and fears that their groups are or will be penetrated by Saddam. They disagree over who personally should lead, tactics to be adopted, and acceptance of aid from foreign powers. Some are uncomfortable with American support, others welcome it. Some fear repercussions or retribution from Baghdad, others fear civil war and chaos if Saddam's regime collapses. Some see no credible alternative to Saddam or his generals. And some fear that one day, when Saddam's supporters become exiles, outside opposition could be used against them, should they come to power in Baghdad. A few call for a return to the good old days of prerevolutionary Iraq and seek rule by a council of elders. Sharif Ali, a cousin of the last king, Faysal II, heads the Constitutional Monarchist Party and is convinced that Iraqis would choose this path if only they were given the choice.

Finally, Saddam's opponents agree on a few basic theories and little else. Most concur that when change comes, it will be sudden and it will come from within Iraq. They want the West—and especially the United States—to guarantee protection if they are to defy Saddam. Kurdish leaders want additional security assurances for the north while Shia leaders call on the United States to draw a red line in the south against Iraqi repression and military activity similar to the one drawn in Kurdistan. Some want sanctions ended now, while others insist they remain in effect. The exiles claim to have support from Iraq's neighbors and say Iran is a helpful influence, but none of Iraq's Arab neighbors wants to openly embrace opponents of Saddam, and Tehran is careful to keep a discreet distance between it and SCIRI operations.

Iraq's "minority" populations—the Kurds and the Shia—have conflicting aspirations that could seriously impact on a post-Saddam government. Iraq's Kurds are represented in the opposition by the traditional PUK and KDP organizations and by some small Islamist factions. Their leaders say they want federalism, which they define as voluntary self-rule within a federal state in which they—and not the central government in Baghdad—determine the rights and

obligations of citizenship. They demand Kirkuk as their capital, even though it lies outside their current jurisdiction and is also claimed by Turkmen and Arabs. Will they fight with United States forces or attack Kirkuk? For the moment, they are trying to preserve what they have without provoking Saddam or antagonizing the United States. Who do the Kurds trust? Who can they trust? No one.

Iraq's Shia are not a monolithic community. They can be divided into three groups: secular city types; rural, tribal, and religious elements; and clerics in the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala and the Kazimiyah section of Baghdad with a veneer of Persian culture and history of religious clerical scholarship and political dissent.⁶ Those living in the southern and more rural areas tend to be more tribal and religious-oriented than their urban counterparts. Both identify themselves as Arab and Iraqi and remained loyal to the state of Iraq in the eight-year war with Shia Iran. Some groups have been boosted by Saddam's neotribal policies of the 1990s. Many oppose the presence and positions of the SCIRI, led by Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim from his safe haven in Iran. Within the Shia mosques are almost certainly extensive networks connected to exiles in Iran and elsewhere. Hakim acknowledges publicly that Iraq is not Iran, and the conditions supporting clerical rule (*vilayat-i faqih*) in Iran are inappropriate for Iraq. Hakim and his followers, however, are steeped in an activist religious-political tradition and most likely are wedded to the ultimate establishment of an Islamic republic in Iraq. Flashpoints for all the Shia would be the declaration of a Kurdish state, its seizure of Kirkuk and its oilfields, and a prolonged American military presence in Iraq.

AFTER SADDAM, WHAT?

The United States will face a critical political decision before the military battle for Iraq is over—to whom should the United States turn over power, authority, and responsibility? The Iraqi opposition in exile, led by the INC and Ahmad Chalabi, will assume that it deserves the spoils of war; members of that opposition may be present with United States units as they move into Iraq. The Iraqi National Accord, led by a former general and a Baath Party refugee, and other once-prominent military and political defectors will demand their share of the pie as well. All will sing a democratic tune, although their own behavior in opposition activities abroad has been self-serving, autocratic, and high-handed.

But a dilemma could surface. Elements in the military, the Baath Party, Saddam's inner circle, or a

⁶The shrine cities are especially sacred to Shias from Iraq and Iran and the Sunnis as well. They contain the tombs of Muhammed's son-in-law and successor, Ali, his son Huseyn, and many of the religious and political leaders central to Islam. They are also centers of Shia religious education, law, and pilgrimage.

trusted tribal leader could decide just before or after the United States attacks Iraq to do the unthinkable but long hoped for: eliminating Saddam. His sons and cousins who dominate the security and intelligence apparatus would be gone as well. In return for this “act of courage,” the general or prominent political or tribal leader would expect a great reward—power. Would he agree to rule with the exiled opposition? Or, more likely, would he turn to his family, friends, and tribal-political allies to receive the prize that is Iraq?

One outcome seems certain. Most Iraqis will probably abandon Saddam quickly when they see war coming. They are likely to hide at home or some protected location and stay put until the battles are over and the victor certain and secure. Only a willingness to assume great risk would lead most “average” Iraqis to come forward and join with the United States before it is clear that Saddam and sons are gone. It will be easier, perhaps, for midlevel military and government bureaucrats if they believe they do not risk arrest as war criminals.

Who will Iraqis trust? Chalabi, the INC, and other prominent defectors are known quantities and

extremely unpopular inside Iraq. Those who have fled a country—even Saddam’s Iraq—tend to be condemned by those who have stayed. If a general or political leader is given power, then Iraqis are likely to wonder what has changed in their governance and what the war was about. Moreover, coalitions have an unlucky history in Iraq—none have survived long enough to govern, the last being the July 1968 coalition that brought the militant Baathists to power and that Saddam quickly replaced. Given their mistrust and suspicions of each other as well as their neighbors, many Iraqis may be relieved to have a United States military presence (that is, occupation) if only to protect them from rapacious potential successors. From our vantage point and given Iraq’s bloody history, it is difficult to determine who a likely successor to Saddam could be—is there a Vaclav Havel or Hamid Karzai for Iraq? Probably not. If history is any guide—and it usually is—then Iraq on its own is likely to face a protracted period of chronic instability as coalitions and interests compete with each for control. It will not be pretty; it could be bloody. ■