November 2002

What's Evil in Iraq?

Joyce N. Wiley

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.
Iraq has been declared "evil," an appellation that fits the Iraqi government well. The Ba'hist government has held its own people in a reign of terror for more than three decades, torturing, murdering, and exiling hundreds of thousands of them. It has used chemical weapons of mass destruction (wmd) on them and made them parties to war. The consequences of these policies are also appropriately labeled evil: debt, disease, fear, and international opprobrium. Some of the prescriptions for dealing with the Iraqi government would benefit the long-suffering Iraqi people; others would hurt them more. The best prescription is one that does not further "oppress the weak."

American belief that Iraq might supply weapons of mass destruction (wmd) to terrorists targeting the United States got Iraq included in President Bush’s "axis of evil." The Iraqi government actually used chemical wmd to kill tens of thousands of Iranian troops during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and it has used chemical weapons against Iraqi rebels a number of times—against Iraqi Shi’as in the country’s southern marshes in June 1987, against guerrilla forces at Haj Umran in northern Iraq in November 1987, and against Iraqi Kurdish civilians in Halabja in 1988. In addition to the chemical wmd it has used, the Iraqi government possesses biological wmd and has tried to develop nuclear weapons.

Evil is not a scientific term, to be precisely defined, but it is understood to mean morally bad, pernicious, or highly injurious and destructive. All of these words apply to the vise in which the Iraqi government holds its people. The 22 million Iraqi people...
have endured a reign of terror for decades. Besides WMD, the evils visited on them include torture, murder, pervasive fear, and in the last decade, undernutrition. Since the Gulf War (1990-1991) the government has completely abandoned its responsibilities to its people, committing all its available resources to reconstructing its military and enriching the country’s small elite.

The Iraqi people who have been the targets of these gross abuses are divided religiously between Arab Shi’as, who are around 60% of the population, and Sunni Muslims, who constitute about 37%. The Sunnis are divided ethnically, with Sunni Kurds being some 20% of the population, and Sunni Arabs, the politically dominant group, being the other 17%. The remaining 3% are Arab Christians, Turkish Sunnis, and other minorities. The population of south and central Iraq, including Baghdad, is mainly Shi’ a. Kurds predominate in three northern provinces, and Arab Sunnis are the majority group in the north central part of the country.

This paper gives a brief historical account of the policies of the present Iraqi government and specifies the consequences of those policies. Prescriptions for dealing with Iraq are then examined.

**WHAT’S EVIL**

**Evil Policies**

Iraq’s first Ba’th government came to power in a military coup in February 1963. It stayed for nine months filled with “communist” hunting and executions without trial. Saddam Hussein, a minimally educated young man in his twenties, was a Ba’th Party torturer at that time. The bloodletting turned both public and army against the government, leading Arab nationalists in the army to seize power in November. Nearly five years of relatively benign military government followed.

**THE JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**
In 1968 the Ba'thists returned to power in another coup. This time Saddam appeared as vice-president of the country, having risen meteorically within the party despite spending part of the intervening period in prison and part in Egyptian coffee houses. Although his kinsman General Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr was president, Saddam was from the beginning the one people feared. Using an ‘internal enemies’ strategy reminiscent of Hitler, the new government proceeded to target first one group and then another. Just as Hitler purged in turn communists and Gypsies and Jews and Catholics, so Iraq’s Ba’thist government announced one conspiracy after another, each time proceeding to purge the accused group—‘Iranians’ (read Shi’as), Kurds, communists, and Islamists. Each community was targeted repeatedly, so that there was always some ‘enemy’ on whom attention could be focused.

When the 1973 oil embargo drove up oil prices, Iraqi government coffers overflowed because Iraq was the one Arab oil producer that did not participate in the embargo. The bonanza was used to expand and upgrade the government’s security forces. Sophisticated equipment for surveillance and “interrogation” enabled the various secret police organizations to spy on each other, as well as on the public, and to terrify the entire population. The government’s repressive ability was augmented and exercised. Some 200,000 Kurds were relocated away from the mountains that had been their homeland for centuries. Thousands of Iraqi Shi’as were expelled to Iran. Political opposition to the government became suicidal.

In 1979 Saddam assumed the presidency and promptly purged the Ba’th Party itself, probably including his kinsman, ex-president al-Bakr, who ‘died’ mysteriously. An enormous number of Iraqis were arrested and tortured, many dying in prison. Tens of thousands of Shi’as were expelled from the country, some of them forced to traverse the mountains on foot to get
to Iran, which took them in, despite the fact that many of them did not speak Iranian and had no assets.

In 1980, after executing Shi’a leaders who could have rallied opposition to a government-initiated war, Saddam invaded Iran. The government dealt successfully with the inclination of Shi’ a conscripts to desert by executing family members of soldiers who did. Even so, the government avoided defeat in the eight-year war only through help from the U.S., which provided Iraq with American intelligence data on Iranian forces, sold Iraq helicopter gunships and other quality military equipment, and took a number of steps to weaken Iran.

When the war was finally over in 1988, Saddam carried out his Anfal campaign, killing from 50,000 to 180,000 Kurds according to the Iraq Liberation Act passed by Congress in 1998. The government also purged up to 800 army officers, many of them Shi’a.

Facing serious financial problems due to the long war with Iran, the Iraqi government opted in 1990 for another war, this time against its wealthy but weak neighbor to the south, Kuwait. The gold in Kuwaiti vaults and the oil in Kuwaiti soil would have solved Iraq’s money problems, but this invasion did not get the Western support that the 1980 invasion of Iran did. Instead, the UN placed Iraq under an economic embargo in August 1990. United Nations Resolution 661 imposed comprehensive sanctions on “all commodities and products originating in Iraq…” and on “[T]he sale…of any commodities or products…to any person or body in Iraq…” (Sifry and Cerf 1991, 138-139). US-led international forces were built up in the area and a five-week war, which featured heavy bombing of Iraq, followed. Saddam’s reluctant peasant conscripts were no match for an industrial-world army, and Kuwait was soon freed from Iraq’s control.

As Iraqi troops withdrew from Kuwait, some of them spontaneously turned their weapons on the omnipresent statues of Sad-
dam. The civilian population of southern Iraq quickly joined in, attacking senior members of the Ba’th Party and party symbols. Thus began the March 1991 intifada. Junior members of the Ba’th Party joined the rebels, but the rebellion in the south was handicapped by having no leader(s). Some of the rebels raised banners to senior Shi’a clerics, men who were very elderly, not present, and in no position to lead a rebellion, even if they were inclined to do so. This lack of leadership, coupled with the defeated government’s ability to use helicopter gunships to attack the rebels, enabled the Republican Guard to end the revolt with a bloodbath. Mass arrests and executions followed the end of the fighting in the south.

A few days after the rebellion in the south, the Kurds of northern Iraq also rose against the government. The Kurds’ rebellion was led by tribal chiefs who had previously collaborated with the Iraqi government (Kubba 2001, 74) and turned out better for the Kurds than the rebellion in the south did for the Shi’a. In the north, international pressure forced the withdrawal of the Iraqi army and led to the establishment of an American-led no-fly zone within which the Iraqi government was not allowed to use aircraft, including helicopter gunships. Thus the Kurds gained autonomy in northern Iraq.

Although the Gulf War was over, economic sanctions against Iraq were left in place. In addition, UN Resolution 687 of April 1991, sponsored by the US, required the destruction of Iraq’s chemical and biological weapons and stipulated that no arms could be sold to Iraq. The resolution eased controls on the import of food and medicine, but not on the consumer goods and materials needed to rebuild the country’s devastated infrastructure. Beginning in 1996 some oil export was allowed in an oil-for-food program. Under the program, oil is sold and the proceeds go into a UN-controlled account, of which Iraq gets a share. The
Iraqi government can purchase food and some other civilian items with its part of the revenues.

The sanctions remain the tightest the world has imposed in modern history. Considerable leakage has appeared in the last few years, but the revenues from the smuggled oil benefit the government, not the public. That the Iraqi government would evade and defy the international sanctions was assured, given its past behavior. From their very accession to power, the Ba'thists have relied on force. To maintain themselves in power after hurting so many of their own people, they need weapons. The government probably also feels a need for weapons to protect itself against the myriad of enemies it has in the region, some of whom, Iran and Kuwait for example, were made enemies by the government's own actions.

**Evil Consequences**

Whether one looks at the economic, social, political, or religious area, the consequences of the Iraqi government's policies merit the designation "evil." The sanctions are devastating the country, but the international community has been unwilling to remove them as long as Saddam is in power, and he is not about to help the Iraqi people by leaving voluntarily. This is no surprise, given his past record and the penchant of all governments to stay in power. Even so, much of the blame for the destitution and agony of the Iraqi people lies with him.

**ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES**

The country's debt is astronomical. The UN Compensation Commission reports that 100 countries have lodged claims against Iraq and that claims for financial losses related to the in-
vasion of Kuwait are $300 billion.\textsuperscript{1} Government debts from the Iran-Iraq War also wait to be paid.

The bombing damage done in 1990 and 1991 has not been repaired in much of south and central Iraq. School buildings are unfit for use. Schools that are operating lack books and supplies. Teacher training is non-existent. Literacy has declined from 90\% to 66\% since 1990 (Garfield 2000, 18). The world’s advances in technology and science are unstudied.

During the eleven years of international sanctions on Iraq, a UN panel called Committee 661, named after the 1990 Security Council resolution that instituted the sanctions, has determined what can or cannot enter Iraq. Anything that might have a military purpose, e.g. lead pencils, stethoscopes, pesticides, and spare parts for the water, sanitation, and electricity systems, is put on hold. The economy is utterly ruined, with virtually nothing being produced. Even agriculture, sorely needed to feed people, lacks vital machinery. The currency has collapsed. The average Iraqi’s monthly income dropped to between $2 and $5. Prices, however, remain very high, e.g. airfare and the “departure tax” for a trip to Jordan was $500 in 2000.\textsuperscript{2} Iraq used to have a substantial middle class. Now everyone except the small government elite has been reduced to poverty. Educated people who can emigrate have done so.

In 2002 some improvement occurred as the government raised salaries, increased hospital supplies, and extended the hours when electricity is available. Presumably the government could have taken these steps earlier, but did so in 2002 in order to generate some public support in anticipation of a US attack.

\textsuperscript{1} Middle East International, 29 September 2000, p.21.
\textsuperscript{2} Middle East International 26 January 2001, p. 20.
Social Consequences

Under the UN oil-for-food program Iraq is allowed about 37 cents a day per capita for nutrition, medicine and other needs. The food products purchased and distributed are low in protein and the ration lasts only about half of the month, but it does help the regime keep track of people (Graham-Brown 1997, 36). As for medicines and hospital supplies, the government actually buys fewer health supplies than the U.N has allocated. The UN official responsible for monitoring Iraqi applications for imports under the oil-for-food program has stated that in a six-month period “the value of applications for supplies Iraq submitted in the health sector was only $83.6 million, whereas $624 million had been allocated.” According to UNICEF, the mortality rate for Iraqi children under five has increased by 160%, compared to 1990. Malnutrition and waterborne diseases caused by the destruction of the country’s water, sanitation, and electrical infrastructure during the Gulf War continue to kill thousands every month. Many of the children who live are dwarfed by malnutrition.

In southern Iraq, the area heavily bombed during the Gulf War, the rate of leukemia and other cancers, as well as birth deformities, has been so high since 1991 that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in January 2001 ordered an inquiry into the effect of the depleted uranium armaments dropped there during the Gulf War. Saddam’s WMD attacks caused a high incidence of

---

3 *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 February 2002.
5 *Middle East International*, 21 December 2001, p. 28.
 WHAT'S EVIL IN IRAQ? 79

birth defects, cancers, respiratory problems, and infertility among the survivors of Halabja and may be the cause of some of the similar problems among the Shi'as of southern Iraq.

Political Consequences

The government's policies have resulted in a major loss of Iraqi territory. Control of northern Iraq was lost in 1991 as a result of the international requirement that the Iraqi army withdraw from Kurdish territory. A small amount of very important territory was lost in the south when UN Security Council Resolution 833 of 1994 reduced Iraq's access to the sea by drawing a new border in Kuwait's favor.

Human rights in Iraq could hardly have gotten worse than they were, but the government has carried out genocide in the south against the Shi'a Ma'dan, turning the marshes that were their livelihood into desert to punish them for helping the 1991 rebels. Arrests and torture of all Iraqis continue apace. Informers and secret police are everywhere. Debilitated by fear, depression and disease, much of the population is immobilized.

The tell-tale beards of salafi Muslims, rarely seen in Iraq in the past, have appeared among individual young Sunnis in Baghdad and in a group of up to 700 in the Kurdish autonomous region. The salafis are Sunni fundamentalists, possibly al-Qaeda and definitely anti-Shi'a. The group in Kurdistan, called Ansar al-Islam (Helpers of Islam), includes Kurds, Iraqi Arabs, Jordanians, Afghans, Moroccans, and Palestinians. They have murdered women for refusing to wear the veil and they have been targeting Kurdish leaders, presumably to decapitate Kurdish military forces that might join in an effort to overthrow the Iraqi government. The group reportedly has ties to al-Qaeda and very

8 One recalls that the Afghan leader, Ahmad Massoud, was assassinated 9/9/01, just before the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center.
likely has connections to Saddam’s secret police. Sponsorship of a religious group would be a departure for Saddam, who was known for being anti-religious until he adopted a religious persona in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War, a change Iraqis dismiss as equivalent to a jailhouse conversion. If Saddam is sponsoring these salafi Muslims, religious motivation can surely be ruled out.

International policies have also had some negative consequences. Sanctions have undermined the urban middle class (Kubba 2001, 69), the class that has always been the strongest supporter for a unified Iraq. Deaths from American and British air strikes during their patrol of the southern no-fly zone kill 100 or so per year. Such deaths amounted to 353 in the three-year period from 1998 to 2001. The bombing is usually aimed at degrading Iraq’s air defense system, but bombs and missiles kill people as well as radar systems.

**Religious Consequences**

The Iraqi clergy, both Shi’a and Sunni, are so weakened they are almost unable to minister to their people (Wiley 2001). The government has usurped their functions, dictated the subjects of their sermons, and stolen their financial assets. The Sunni Arab clergy are state employees working under a degree of government control that has turned pious and capable young Sunni men away from religious vocations.

The Shi’a clergy have managed to maintain some independence of the government but are sorely debilitated in number by government assassinations, arrests and forced exile. Many of their mosques have been closed. Their senior cleric is under house arrest, and they are no longer able to conduct religious education. On the other hand, many Iraqis have become more

---

9 *Middle East International*, 31 August 2001, p. 18.
religious, probably attributable to the fact that people turn to re-
ligion in times of crisis. Thus the Shi’a shrines in south central
Iraq have experienced their largest crowds ever in recent years.

**PRESCRIPTIONS FOR DEALING WITH**
**THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT**

Most of the Iraqi people fervently desire to be relieved of
their oppression, but they fear the death and destruction that
could be part of the process. What that process might be is under
discussion. The proposals being considered are as follows.

**Change in the Sanctions Regime**

Economic sanctions have not accomplished their goal of
weakening Saddam. There is widespread agreement internation­
ally that the sanctions hurt the people of Iraq, not Saddam. In
fact, the sanctions actually benefit Saddam in a number of ways,
not the least of which is giving him a ready excuse for the coun­
try’s ills. Sanctions enable him to blame the lack of food and af­
fordable medicine on the United States and to blame his pursuit
of armaments on the necessity of defense against Iraq’s obvious
enemies. The government is able to circumvent the sanctions by
illegally transporting oil via trucks to Turkey and Jordan, through
Iranian waters, and more recently via a pipeline to Syria. The
illegal revenues are then used for military purposes.

A “smarter” system of sanctions was adopted at the end of
May 2002, but it is not likely to improve the situation greatly. It
retains a “goods review list” that can be used to delay dual use
items, and it does not increase the country’s revenues in any way.
Most of the people who are dying are dying of bad water, which
will not be affected by the new sanctions regime. The changes
suggested by people like Sir Alan Munro, former British Ambas-
sador to Saudi Arabia, would have redirected restraints to specifically military items and away from civilian goods (Munro, 26), thus making it possible to repair the water and sewage systems.

**Building a Legal Case against Saddam**

It is commonly believed in Iraq that the United States wanted Saddam in power and wants the Iraqi people debilitated or it would not have left him in power and the sanctions in place at the end of the Gulf War. Saddam used to, and may still, tell his secondary elite that he has a special relationship with the United States. (The US did help him a lot in the Iran-Iraq War.) Iraqis and others could be disabused of this belief if the United States were to build a public, legal case against Saddam, thereby attesting that the goal is to get rid of him, not to cripple the Iraqi people. The US Ambassador-at-large for War Crimes, Pierre-Richard Prosper, has told Congress he is developing data on Saddam’s atrocities, and Representative Tom Lantos (Dem., CA) has suggested an international war crimes tribunal for Iraq. Saddam could certainly be charged with a wide variety of crimes against humanity, genocide against the Kurds for example. Such a step would encourage the defection of Iraqi soldiers when the military phase of removing Saddam begins.

**Coup in the Inner Circle**

A coup in Saddam’s inner circle has been the favored option of some in the US government, the rationale being that this would get rid of Saddam without the danger of destabilizing the country. Indeed, not much would change under this scenario. Essentially Iraq would get one compromised tyrant in place of

---

another, given that people in Saddam’s inner circle are just about as evil as he is. The new dictator would have to rely on force to stay in power so human rights in Iraq would not likely improve significantly. Fortunately or unfortunately, such a coup has not been possible to effect.

Military Coup

A variation on the inner circle coup would be a military coup by a group of younger, less tainted officers, perhaps with some US assistance. This type of coup has actually been tried a number of times, but most of the officers have been executed even before the coup day arrives, presumably because of the government’s ubiquitous secret police and informer system.

This scenario continues to have appeal to Arab countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia because it would maintain Arab Sunni dominance in Iraq, given that nearly all the army officers are Arab Sunnis. It reportedly appeals to many in Iraq’s Arab Sunni community who fear that a payback mentality could take hold in the other communities if Arab Sunnis lose control the country.

The problem with this scenario is that rule continues to be by a minority, and minority rule has to be imposed. To be stable and accepted, a replacement government will have to be much more representative than past governments have been. Neither the Shi’as nor the Kurds, about 80% of the population, can be expected to embrace this option.

Afghanistan Model of US Air Attack Followed by Ground Troops

The Afghan model of a US bombing campaign, followed by a ground operation conducted by indigenous forces or by US troops has been considered. It is highly likely that the country’s conscript army would rapidly surrender to an indigenous force—probably even to a foreign force; but there are a number of problems with the scenario. Firstly, Iraq is already prostrate, posing
ethical and practical considerations regarding its further destruction through a bombing campaign. Muslim countries and probably other countries as well are adamantly opposed to further victimizing Iraqi victims with a bombing campaign in which many innocent people would be killed and injured. Secondly, pro-American Arab governments like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan might be unable to control their own people during such an attack, for Arab sympathy is very much with the Iraqi people. Thirdly, as Senator Chuck Hagel (Rep., NE) has warned, a military strike on Iraq could break it up and make it more dangerous.11 Fourthly, Iraq might be able to inflict some damage on the attackers. In August 2001, it finally succeeded, after years of trying, in downing one of the US planes that enforce the no-fly zone in Iraq. The plane was a drone so no one was hurt, but the incident does indicate that Saddam’s spending of all the country’s resources on rearmament has had some payoff.

Another problem is who would play the role the Northern Alliance played in Afghanistan, i.e. who would be the ground troops in Iraq. Neither of the organized groups, the Shi’a guerillas in the south and the Kurds in the north, can be expected to fight for another Sunni Arab dictatorship. The Kurds now have substantial autonomy, which could be diminished or worse when a new government comes to power. They can hardly be expected to go up against the Iraqi army in a fight that could worsen their situation. The Kurds have three times responded to US blanishments and risen against the Iraqi government (the early 1970s, 1991, and 1996), only to be left to Saddam’s ‘mercies’ when the US withheld support while Saddam used his army against them. Before they take on Saddam again, they want assurance they will not be abandoned. In the words of the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, “Tomorrow if America comes

with a real guarantee, we will trust. If they come with only words, we will not."  
This option also has the problem that the military coup option has. Who would be the replacement government? The US is reportedly considering several Sunni Arab generals for the position. Any of them would leave Iraq with an imposed, minority government.

**Broad-Based Insurgency Supported by a US No-Fly Zone**

This is the scenario that would most likely lead to self-determination for the Iraqi people. The insurgents would be a joint force of Kurds in the north and troops of the Supreme Command for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in the south. The US would aid the rebels by enforcing a no-fly zone over the whole country, thereby preventing Saddam from using the WMD he has used so successfully against rebels in the past. Disaffected army units are expected to join in, as they did at the end of the Gulf War. Already the army is experiencing attrition. As of April 2002 as many as one-fourth of the 400,000 strong army were missing from their posts according to *The Observer* of April 28, 2002.  

The strength of the army is estimated at less than half what it was ten years ago, and defectors estimate that up to 85% of those remaining would surrender.

The Shi'a fighting force would be led by SCIRI, which has waged a low-level guerrilla war in the south under the leadership of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim. Tribal Shi'as would likely join the effort in the south as soon as the fighting started for the al-Hakim name has credibility with tribal Shi'as. The Shi'a rebels do not want a wide bombing campaign for they

---

13 Accessed at www.guardian.co.uk.  
know they would be discredited by association with a devastating US bombing operation that would further damage their already prostrate country. The leader of SCIRI has said that Iraqis can free Iraq if the US enforces a no-fly zone throughout the country and prevents the regime from using its heavy weapons, a strategy the US used in Kosovo.

The plan of democratic government sought by al-Hakim and his supporters has been known for several decades (Wiley 1992, 125-127). Al-Hakim has consistently supported the idea of democracy in Iraq, and did so again in the *Christian Science Monitor* interview cited above. The governmental system sought by the reformist Shi'as al-Hakim leads has an elected parliament and an elected executive. The Supreme Court would be appointed and would consist of Islamic clerics. The court’s precise composition has been left to negotiation with other Iraqi groups, but there is private acknowledgement that it would include Sunnis and Shi'as, Arabs and Kurds, just as the parliament would.

The two Kurdish groups could be encouraged to join in by the promise of two or three Kurdish provinces in a new federal, democratic Iraq. Many of the Kurds are inclined toward democracy. The section of Kurdistan controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan has long had more freedom than other parts of Iraq. The creation of more than one Kurdish province within a unified Iraq might be tolerable to the Turks, who are strongly opposed to an independent Kurdistan.

**CONCLUSION**

Saddam Hussein is a terrorist who is responsible for the deaths of some one million Iranians, Iraqis, and Kuwaitis. He is evil, and ridding Iraq and the world of him is highly desirable. A

---

major consideration protecting Saddam in the past was the fear that deposing him could destabilize Iraq, but now that he has been identified as a potential threat to the United States, the “stability” of his horrific police state may be coming to an end.

In the Code of Hammurabi, one of Iraq’s early rulers, Hammurabi (ruled 1792 to 1750 B.C.) declared that “the strong may not oppress the weak.”16 The Iraqi people are very weak, but they are not evil. They have been the government’s chief victims and have tried repeatedly to oust Saddam—just as President Bush the first and President Clinton did. No strategy for ridding the world of Iraq’s evil government comes with a guaranteed outcome, but some strategies have better prospects than others. It is herein contended that the policy that has morality on its side and would be well received in Iraq and most other countries would involve: (1) building a public legal case against Saddam; (2) enforcing a no-fly zone over all Iraq; and (3) working with indigenous forces favorable to democracy, namely Shi‘as, Kurds, and willing Arab Sunnis.

REFERENCES


16 Sawyer, Jon. “Stories of Privation, Signs of Improvement,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 26 May 2002.
