



Discussion Papers

Iraqi Perspective on Regime Change: Keep the Inspections, Lift the Sanctions

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Iraqi Mundher Adhami, from the Education and Professional Studies department at Kings College London, offers a personal opinion on the current situation. The impact of inspectors upon the ability of the regime to execute human rights abuses has until now been underestimated. So too has the potential of the professional and middle classes to challenge the regime, not necessarily head on, but in providing an alternative power base. Regime change may be achieved without a recourse to all-out war.

Introduction

It may yet not be too late to achieve peaceful change in Iraq, one that both neutralises its threats to neighbours, and guarantees democratic rights for its citizens. Efforts to terminate Saddam Hussain's regime must avoid civil strife and the fragmentation of the country, and any return to colonialism. In addition, the United Nations must not be allowed to slide into the role of a club for big power bargaining over other countries' resources. UN inspections, in tandem with other initiatives, could help revive Iraqi civil society and decisively tilt the balance of power in the country against tyranny.

This paper describes Iraqi civil society and its survival so far under the dual burden of sanctions and dictatorship; this has shaped Iraqi politics and values, and affected perceptions of the future. Iraqis are not sitting in their homes awaiting the liberators. Their perceptions are a great deal more complex. This paper considers the potential for mobilisation of the Iraqi people and assesses their loyalty to the regime and their support for US plans. It is dangerous to assume that any attack on Iraq will end swiftly in victory for the invaders. Nor should one assume that any new regime would either be open to US influence or command the respect of the Iraqi people.

Iraqi perspectives on US involvement

No-one should doubt that most Iraqis, most Arabs, and indeed most third world nations, do not believe that the US is interested in democracy in their countries. They have detailed knowledge of their history and can provide a convincing account of how US policy – usually applied by the CIA - has repeatedly thwarted any moves towards democracy. They have no reason to believe a new leaf has been turned by the Bush administration; they see the carnage in Palestine daily, sanctioned by the US. They perceive that the US is waging a campaign against anything Muslim under the pretext of fighting terrorism. They also believe that for decades it was the US itself that created many of those terrorists, primarily for use against democratic and popular movements.

Many Iraqis are equally sceptical about the US attitude towards Saddam Hussein's regime, however incredible that may seem to outside observers. They remember the time in March 1991, after the regime had all but collapsed and large uprisings occurred around the country, the US stood back and enabled Iraqi helicopter airpower and elite units to crush the revolt. They continue to suffer under the most comprehensive sanctions regime in history. This has debilitated Iraqi society and handed significant domestic control over to the regime, through the people's dependence on monthly handout of rations and the blocking of medical and educational opportunities. Iraqis are convinced that the US sees Iraq as the enemy rather than Saddam. They fear either a last minute bargain deal that leaves Saddam entrenched in power and just as able to repress his people, or that the US will replace the regime with one just as bad (and more clearly compliant).

Civil society

The disintegration of Iraqi civil society continued throughout the Iran-Iraqi war of the 1980s and the sanction of the 1990s. Lawlessness, bribery and corruption, family breakdown, prostitution and decline of civil behaviour all contributed to a climate of despair and paralysis. But in the late-1990s there was a visible revival.

The extended family system has re-established itself as a form of social security, peer solidarity and safety. This trend has been reinforced by the regime's security-based policy of reviving the clans, (blood-related communities of extended families normally of three or four generations, with self-appointed headmen and economic and legal powers). This has suffocated initiative and alternative viewpoints. In elections, for example, individual ballot papers are frequently collected by the head of the household and given blank to the local regime's officers so as to prove themselves as no threat even to the local balances within the regime.

The ration system has also been a useful mechanism for keeping track and control over the population, though it has also encouraged cooperation and exchange of food and medicine. Strengthened networks of large families have short-circuited official controls.

Neighbourhoods have developed self-help vigilante watches, mutual support, and even crude municipal services. Over the last decade Iraqis have developed roots, and mobility has reduced dramatically. As wages have plummeted, women in particular have abandoned their public-sector employment in favour of cottage industry or other local employment.

Historically, Iraqi society is largely secular. Islam is taken more as heritage, culture and even as high literature, than a detailed code of conduct; and all faiths are accepted through a liberal interpretation of Islam. At times of trouble, however, faith serves as a personal refuge, a social common denominator, and a code for modesty and civil behaviour. Such a religiosity is apolitical, more an affirmation of identity that defies imposition of alien values, whether by the regime or by foreign control. The regime has recognised the value in adapting religious symbols, and by using harsh measures (such as the reported beheading of prostitutes) to demonstrate their credentials. While this may not be convincing to the Iraqi public that is fully aware of the regime's secular nature, and even of the debauchery of some of its leaders, it can placate people's sensibilities. There is no doubt that the revival of religiosity has reduced petty crime and unruly behaviour as well as dissent.

The technocrats

Pitiful government wages have allowed corruption to spread in all official dealing - something the regime has acknowledged. Saddam has even experimented with some quotas and fees explicitly to augment civil servants'

salaries. But officers' reliance on bribery or largess risks public contempt.

In the meantime, the controlled collapse of the imposing state apparatus has highlighted the importance of civil servants and scientists, a group of largely apolitical appointees (although formally members of the Ba'ath Party). This group of people are running banks, organising the timely purchase, storage and distribution of foodstuffs to about 20 million people, solving transport problems, maintaining the education and health services under appalling shortages.

Prominent in this respect are the thousands of scientists formerly employed in defence industries, including in nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programmes, which were disbanded and destroyed during the UNSCOM inspections between 1991 and 1998. Many turned their attention to the reconstruction of energy and utility infrastructure, much of which was achieved in a matter of months. This cadre largely lives in poverty but has a great symbolic capital of goodwill, and has a sense of pride in intellectual achievement, honesty and civil responsibility. They are largely western educated, speak European languages, and could bridge the gap between international civil society and the communities within which they live. They are also capable of leadership in any post-Saddam Iraq, in the context of positive and honest engagement by the international community centred on a sensitive and robust programme of UN and IAEA inspections.

The Inspectors: a check on tyranny

The very fact of the presence of inspectors provides a check on the tyranny of the regime and on the general accumulation of arms stocks and the movement of weapons (conventional as well as unconventional). This could be even more effective if UN and IAEA inspections were applied universally across the whole region of the Middle East, preventing diversion and addressing concerns that the international community has been partial in its dealings. Inspectors have also humiliated the regime, demonstrated its weakness, and exposed petty pilfering and inefficiencies.

Although the inspectors' remit does not include human rights, the regime is also less able to indulge in torture, mass deportation and other atrocities upon which it built its power base originally. Any information by an NGO or individual human rights workers in Iraq about an unlawful arrest, torture or disappearance can be readily followed by an inspection team visiting the prison, the police station or the family house to check, since they can claim there are leads to possible weapons-related information with those people. The regime's minders will be there but real evidence cannot easily be covered up with unannounced inspections. Similarly, any hot spot of dissent where atrocities or threats of mass repression are expected can also be made an indirect site for inspection through uninvited visits to local security establishments.

The fact that the US and UK government and the Iraqi opposition groups they support have not provided any current information on such abuses while their claims on proscribed weapons' production sites proved unreliable so far indicates that they are out of touch with the situation on the ground. They are recycling old information. And even with the old information, the hyperbole may be damaging the fight against Saddam's tyranny. For example claims of the existence of mass-graves are yet to be checked by the inspectors by probing near their suspected sites. If atrocities have been judicially legitimised, then the judiciary itself should be the target of attack by human rights campaigners rather than repeating unsubstantiated claims and thereby playing into the hands of a devious regime feigning and disproving claims.

Of course there are limitation on this proposed use of the inspectors in support of civil rights. In the current climate of the threat of war genuine popular opposition to Saddam's regime may well be unwilling to play into the hands of invaders. Cooperation from Iraqis without close associations with the regime is far more likely if the sanctions and the threat of destruction and invasion were lifted. The continued presence of inspectors in Iraq could play an important role in rebuilding a long-term healthy political solution.

Coordinated international and domestic action

If the general economy were allowed to flourish by the removal of general sanctions it would weaken the grip of the regime and empower the population to protest and force reforms. In the past Iraqi peoples' struggle for reform have always been undermined by regime's use of oil revenues as much as the big-power support for the regime whether in arms sales, security apparatus training, or overlooking of human rights abuses. (Remember

the 'but he is our son-of-a-bitch' quip) Now the non-oil economy has to carry a greater weight while the state's income from oil pays the compensations, debt and rebuilding of the infrastructure, a new scene is set. If the international community focused its efforts on empowering without prejudice the educated civil servants to provide leadership, there is a chance that a new beginning could be built for Iraq, with positive consequences in neighbouring states. Iraqis would likely view overt intervention by foreign powers that involved force and imposition as suspect, undermining any positive impacts.

The apparatus of tyranny must be dealt with internally by a blend of the rule of law and truth and reconciliation processes. Crimes against humanity will require particular attention. The death penalty should be abolished as soon as possible to reduce the likelihood of cycles of thoughtless revenge and despotism. Rehabilitation of victims and exiles would also need to be assured, based on legal processes.

The origins of the regime

Opposition rhetoric portrays the present regime as a semi-literate clannish ruling elite narrowly based on Tikrit (on the upper Tigris) and to make a link between strong clan loyalties and small-town bigotry. This gives the impression of a Bedouin roughness, lack of culture and faith, and of Sunni sectarianism. The regime has indeed built up its political base on a semi-rural population across the country to counter what it saw as decadent urban elites with suspect loyalties and ideologies. This is not dissimilar to many other populist movements elsewhere.

But this image underestimates the sophisticated background of the regime. Tikrit itself is an ancient trading post with links both to Arabia and to the lands to the East and North. Like many historic towns it has always had a mixed ethnic and faith population with mosques, Sufi, Christian, and Jewish temples standing within sight of each other. The legendary Saladin Ayubi dynasty, of Kurdish origin, ruled the Muslim Middle East in the 13th and 14th centuries, and arose from Tikrit. During the Ottoman rule, Tikrit's position between Baghdad and Mosul on the route to the capital Istanbul made for extensive trading and cultural links. After the establishment of modern Iraq many from Tikrit joined the army, a highly regarded profession at the time, and later the main route to power in 1968. The military values of discipline, loyalty, toughness, national consciousness and technical skills remain an important influence upon social policy.

Some of those now in opposition and who label the regime tribal and primitive in nature were often all too ready to ally themselves with it in the early 1970s. At that time they hailed the regime's openness, patriotism and socialism, while simultaneously using its support and working hard to recruit its own independent layer of functionaries. Only later, when these groups were squeezed out, murdered and exiled, did they portray the regime as a revival of tribalism and Arab chauvinism. The loyalty to today's regime is actually not so clearly based upon political alliance as rooted in more basic affiliations.

The nature of the regime

The ruling group is frequently portrayed as a criminal clique that is incoherently corrupt and exceptionally cruel, often by former members of the regime. In reality the regime is simply a more extreme, Iraqi variant of other Arab regimes: patriarchal and reliant on largesse and brutal punishment. Its policies and functionaries appeal to simple drives and emotions, and are prone to bravado and bombast. These features, however, are far from unique!

The regime promotes simple ideals based on loyalty and solidarity, valuing strong independence from foreign control above progress or material gain. This is, however, tempered with pragmatism and diplomacy, although the regime has frequently accepted compromises for survival that it later reneged upon, both in its dealings with foreign powers or internal forces. Sometimes, and particularly so at present, it appears to be prepared to await its fate; whilst still looking to exploit big power rivalries. It attempts simultaneously to stand firm for its Arab and internal opinion, while quietly acquiescing sufficiently to prevent overt conflict.

The regime generally specialises in deception and secret dealing. Saddam's many aphorisms, one of which found as a banner in each Iraqi newspaper, hail a defiant and victorious spirit, promoted as a value in its own right. Simultaneously, he promotes the values of pragmatism and the long view to his population, saying "we cannot trust a historical pattern to continue, neither could we assume it no longer applies". His ironic recent proclamation, "we are not facing a vastly superior enemy directly, rather biding our time." is often repeated.

The regime's misinformation campaign is particularly intriguing in its story on historical links with the United States. There is a widespread suspicion within Iraq that the Saddam and Bush families were partners throughout the 1980s, and that the Iraqi regime was a US client state in a complicated game in the Gulf. The United States is thought to have prolonged the Iran-Iraq war, and encouraged other Arab Gulf states to finance Iraq (with a huge proportion siphoned off into private accounts). While not denying these links, the regime rationalises them as "working the ways of the world" and that the wealth they gained was held in trust. The belief held by many in Iraq is that the United States betrayed any such arrangements and is an unreliable partner for anyone contemplating regime change.

Non-Arab Iraq!

Opposition proposals for a post-Saddam Iraq have frequently promoted an abstract notion of Iraqi patriotism in place of an Arab identity. This lacks historical or emotional content, and denies the reality on the ground. The four-fifth Arab majority in Iraq includes cross-ethnic citizens within extended Arab families with great pride in ancient genealogies straddling Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. Arabs are very conscious of their genealogy, with a customary family knowledge going back centuries. Aligning regime change in Iraq with a denial of its Arab nature risks pitching these social strata against any emerging regime, with a likelihood that it is regarded as composed of urbanites with suspect loyalties and external influences. Many Arab-nationalists will thereby suspect the United States of acting primarily in Israel's interests by squashing such Arab identities. Despite Colin Powell's commitment to put Iraqi oil revenues in trust for the people in a post-war situation, there is a strong suspicion that taking control of Iraqi oil (whether directly or indirectly) is a key objective of US policy. Iraqi patriotism without an Arab role is seen as surrender.

Many Kurds also view non-Arab Iraqi patriotism with suspicion. Several Kurds defended the Arab character of Iraq at their latest opposition conference. They regard the claims of other minorities, such as the Turks and Assyrians, as a Trojan horse for foreign intervention by Turkey and other countries. Many are content with the existing constitutional settlement that gives them educational and cultural rights, including in the central government, in addition to their *de facto* self-rule areas.

Shi'a - Sunni divide

The demands by the Iran-based Council of Islamic Revolution for a sectarian divide between Shi'as and Sunnis in Iraq are an embarrassment to US plans. On the one hand they mobilise communitarian Sunni fears, driving them into the arms of the regime they otherwise loathe. On the other hand, for a number of reasons, they fail to appeal to the Shi' Arab majority. Religious authorities in Iraq have traditionally avoided affairs of state (the Palestinian issue being a notable exception).

Even in the height of the March 1991 uprising against Saddam Hussein clerics from the Council issued fatwas on avoiding bloodshed, and abiding by the law. They are especially wary of linkage with historical enemies like the United States, and wanted to distance themselves from Iran. Hence, the existing categorical fatwas against any such collaboration. In any case, the majority of Shi'a urban middle-class loath religious authority, having either a secular or a 'personal faith' view of Islam, similar to those of Sunni background. This may outweigh any sense of injustice derived from their low participation within the formal state apparatus, especially as such involvement carries dubious kudos or economic advantage under sanctions.

Tribal alliances have been strengthened by the regime since the end of the 1991 Gulf War through provision of privileges and control over the allocation of resources. In any case, many Sunni and Shi'a share the same familial heritage, their identity today depending on whether their families settled in the north or the south of the country. There are frequent inter-marriages and economic links. There is no great support for foreign intervention in such communities.

Outside the religious groups, the middle class and the tribal alliances, any sectarian Shi'a mobilisation against the regime is likely to be confined to disenfranchised groups with grievances that the regime has not managed to control or press into exile. The regime has already evicted over two million people it has seen as a potential threat, removing them from active internal opposition. The regime will be able to use its propaganda to portray such disenfranchised groups, in some urban centres (such as the Al-Thawra townships in East Baghdad), as a threat to other groups.

Economic drivers

Significant internal opposition is more likely to arise from Iraqis' economic plight than their tribal loyalties. One influential group would be the 3,000 or so families of the entrepreneurs and millionaires, who first emerged in the 1970s oil boom. These businessmen, farmers, importers/exporters and manufacturers have maintained relationships with the authorities, and are interwoven in tribal alliances and across ethnic and sectarian divides. They have demonstrated loyalty to the regime, as well as being wise to its caprice and opportunities for mutual benefit. This group, more likely than not, would see US occupation as threatening its position. However, if it were clear that a new regime were in the offing, their loyalty would likely be unreliable to Saddam.

Managerial and technical elites in the country have strong influence upon the opinions of the once-affluent middle class in the cities, comprising about half of the population and now totally impoverished and reliant on rations. There is no quick fix for Iraq's astronomic debts, compensation claims, and the hangovers from the 1991 \$200 plus billion destruction of infrastructure and economic assets. Any forthcoming war will further damage the country and reduce its ability to recover.

For most Iraqis, regime change will in effect mean a dangerous interruption of their current mainstay of rations. However loathsome the regime, its non-means-tested discharge of welfare responsibilities to nearly 20 million people has been recognised as largely fair by international agencies such as UNICEF. Even in the autonomous Kurdish zone there is an unprecedented dependency on central government food stores in Kirkut and Musul. Any significant shock to the system would lead to a humanitarian disaster. Iraqis blame both the regime and the United States for their plight. The regime has miscalculated and mismanaged, but this has been tempered by its functionaries' involvement within the social fabric. On the other hand, the United States has acted in its own strategic interests, with no thought for the social and human consequences.

The economy, and particularly the standard of living within the middle classes, has recently been slowly improving. UN statistics show a decline in acute malnutrition since the start of the oil-for-food programme, while infrastructure and manufacturing capacities have been repaired. The regime has retrenched, and has slimmed down its government and military apparatus. This, along with a gradual relaxing of sanctions and the development of a sophisticated regional black economy, seems to have turned morale within the country around. Some Iraqis suspect this is another reason for the US threats today: successful defiance is not acceptable to the imperial power.

In reacting to the prospect of regime change through US attack, Iraqis will try to exercise fine judgement between their patriotism and pragmatic immediate interests, based upon the odds of rapid regime change. Some will reason that the United States may not be as barbaric as last time, that they will try to avoid pushing a fragile society into disaster in order to use Iraq as a show-case for benevolent imperialism. Many, however, recognise that outcomes depend upon the ferocity with which the regime will try to hold its ground.

Will the ruling elite fight back?

The US threat is perceived to be directed against the ruling elite as a whole. There is a collective sense of fate within the large core of tribal alliances, the army, bureaucracy, security organs, the party, and business class. The belated offers to give sanctuary outside the country to Saddam and his immediate family seem phoney and irrelevant, and ignore the importance of the dominant kinship group of Abu Nasser and the wider network. These groups have no traditions of living abroad; they fear Israeli and other assassins, lending some weight to their declared intentions of fighting to the death in Iraq. While there may be some doubt as to how loyal many army units are to the regime, there must also be a great deal of doubt that many will side with an external invading force, or even one threatening invasion.

It is difficult to predict the regime's military strategy in its defence of Iraq, but it will avoid conflict in exposed countryside. They are likely to use the concentration of global media within the cities to ensure that civilian casualties receive maximum coverage. Civilian losses, both urban and rural, would mobilise domestic opinion against the invading forces more than any Shi'a religious fatwas and patriotic exhortations. The Iraqi military has been developing a decentralised command structure with units operating largely autonomously to harass an invading army. If Iraqi forces can hold up a US invasion significantly and force the conflict to last several months this would immensely complicate US plans, and could prove disastrous both for Iraq and for the international

community. A protracted conflict would lead to the daily broadcast of images of casualties within Iraq and around the Arab world and entrench opposition to any US-based regime. It would also deepen the fall-out from the conflict, in terms of political repercussions, oil prices, and terrorist responses. Desperate, hot-headed revolutionaries and religious fundamentalists would sidestep secular nationalist and democratic elites and civil society.

Hope in the middle class?

There appear to be no obvious political forces currently within Iraq that could replace the Ba'th regime and provide stability within Iraq. The US-supported opposition in exile has no social base in the country apart from the two Kurdish groups, (whose politics are relevant largely to the Kurdish areas) and have historically led to revenge, fragmentation and surrender of sovereignty. In the absence of well-functioning secular parties like the Communist, national democratic, liberal and Arab nationalist parties inside the country, this leaves the professions as the hope for change. This option may be realistic if UN inspectors remained in Iraq along with humanitarian organisations, particularly if they encouraged such moves in their dealings with these professionals

Some creative thinking will be required either to widen the scope of the inspections or to induce the regime to engage with Security Council Resolution 688 concerning wider political participation. There are a number of recent positive trends. One is the *de-facto* continuous erosion of the power of the regime while it continues to rely on the professionals in dealing with the inspectors and with rest of the world. Second, international threats to press charges against some functionaries of the regime if they venture abroad keeps up the pressure. Third, without significant purchases of arms and security products (upon which sanctions ought to be more clearly focused), civil society's hand is strengthened vis-à-vis the regime.

A more proactive role for the inspectors may involve the lifting of blocks ('holds' that can be for an indefinite period) on so-called 'dual use' products, by directly engaging with the civilian economy and the local and administrative structures. Some of 'holds' enforced by the sanction committee (almost always after pressure from the US alone) have been blatantly vindictive and inhumane; examples are legion, but one glaring case was the banning of imports of blood-transfusion bags up to 2001, on the basis that their linings contain material that can be extracted and used in biological weapons. Several other holds have undermined basic repairs to infrastructure; whole replacement electrical or mechanical systems are approved with the exception of minor but vital components that again contain some materials that theoretically could be extracted and used for weapons. By mid 2002 the accumulated holds reached over \$5 billion worth of desperately-needed materials and equipment. If inspectors were to coordinate directly with the users of such materials, such as electricity or oil industry engineers, on the means to ensure that the equipment will not be diverted, many sanctions could be relaxed in such a way that the regime would be weakened domestically. The remit of inspections would thereby be legitimately widened (still focused on WMD control) to include permanent liaison with the civil service and engineers. The regime is no position to reject this proposition as a route for lifting the sanctions..

Whether by the regime itself, by the US occupying force, or by any international efforts that forestall war, there may lie an option of temporarily ceding power to the functionaries in the country, largely de-politicising the government of Iraq while keeping the country intact. Swift moves are also needed to abolish the death penalty, offer amnesty to those convicted specifically of political crimes, and establish legal guarantees using the truth and reconciliation model. The focus must be on developing indigenous civil norms and undercutting the current ruling elites, much as those of Franco and Pinochet were dealt with. Such measures may not appease opponents bent on retribution, but satisfying such emotions by force will only lead to further civil strife that would threaten to engulf the whole of the Middle East.

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