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Between Impediment and Advantage *Saddam's Iraq*

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Domestic tensions

- Tensions between Sunni Muslims and Shi'i Muslims have existed since the days of the first century of the Islamic era. When Iraq became a nation state in 1920-1921 these tensions became a part of Iraqi politics. Like its predecessors in modern Iraq, Saddam Husayn's Ba'th regime is based mainly on the powerful Sunni Arab minority community--at a cost to both the majority Shi'i Arab community and the Sunni Kurds.
- Through the seventies and mainly in 1991, Shi'i Arab resistance to Ba'th party rule resulted in extensive bloodshed; today, it remains a threat to Saddam's authority.
- Despite the co-optation of Shi'is into the ruling Ba'th party under Saddam, Shi'i power in the regime remains marginal.
- Alleged Shi'i ties to the majority Shi'i community in Iran and to Syria's 'Alawi community have incurred Baghdad's intense suspicions, which in turn complicates Saddam's relations with regional neighbors.
- Baghdad's strategies to counteract Sunni-Shi'i tension include the promotion of Arabism as a common denominator of language, culture, and national identity and to redirect internal anger toward Israel. This explains in part Iraq's ultra-radicalism in the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- There are some indications that Saddam has singled out the Shi'is and mainly the Shi'i provincial cities to bear most of the impact of the international embargo. Without power or means, the Shi'is cannot revolt.

Focus on Iraq

Focus On**IRAQ****Collection of Institute
resources related to the
current crisis in Iraq.**

[IV. The fruits of dictatorship: Saddam's decision-making process as a source of high-risk, high-cost policies](#)

Saddam's internal security objectives and concerns

Despite holding the rank of staff field marshal, Saddam has never served in the armed forces. This fact, coupled with a propensity to humiliate his senior military leadership, has fostered the military's contempt, triggering at least four attempted military coups since 1990.

Because of Saddam's reluctance to comply with UN demands to destroy his weapons of mass destruction, Iraq has lost \$110 billion in oil reserves since 1991. This has resulted in serious deficiencies within the Iraqi military--as well as the domestic economy and social welfare.

[VI. An inability to learn: Tactical successes and a strategic bottleneck](#)

Saddam's elite military and security units are young Iraqi men drawn mainly from important Sunni Arab tribal groups. Commanded largely by members of his own tribe and family and rewarded handsomely for service to the regime, they are extremely loyal to Saddam.

[VII. The economy: Vulnerability to inflation and its implications for foreign policy](#)

Regional Strategies

When Saddam consults with his advisers on routine matters, his decision-making is rational, pragmatic, and likely to achieve objectives. His most important foreign policy decisions, however, have been made in isolation. These have led to such disasters as the Iran-Iraq war and the Gulf War.

[Part Two: Domestic, Regional, and Foreign Sources of Power](#)

Not only is the loss of Kurdistan in 1991 a stain he wants to remove from his honor, Saddam recognizes that in reuniting Kurdistan with Iraq, he takes full control of the illicit and lucrative oil trade with Turkey that now benefits him, but also the Kurds.

[VIII. Saddam's power base: the family-tribe-state symbiosis and how it can explain his survival](#)

Iraq's rationale for possessing weapons of mass destruction has not been fully elaborated: In the past, Saddam Husayn and his chief spokesmen suggested that they would serve to compel Israel to alter its behavior and to keep Iran at bay; other Iraqi strategic experts offered the logic of mutually assured destruction to justify possession. Saddam's orders to his non-conventional missile units were apparently to fire if the land offensive reached Baghdad. Whatever the rationale, Iraq has already demonstrated its willingness to target populations that have no ability to respond in kind.

[IX. Iraq's non-conventional arsenal: Between impediment and advantage](#)

Iran's occupation of three key Iraqi islands off its southern coast in 1971 posed a serious strategic threat to Iraq because it gave Iran the power to control entrance to the Persian Gulf from the Gulf of Oman. Iraq first developed its non-conventional arsenals as a "strategic equalizer" to counter Iran's presumed advantage.

Saddam's speeches portray Iraq as leader of the Arabs and sometimes

[X. A shift in Arab attitudes](#)

Muslims worldwide. In his view, combining Gulf oil money with Iraqi military prowess make Arab leadership feasible. Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are crucial in this scenario.

[About the Report](#)

In the near future, some Arab regimes (mainly Gulf states) may accept Iraq's non-conventional weapons as a foregone conclusion. This will prompt them to normalize relations as insurance against an uncertain future.

For many in the Arab world, Saddam's attack on the Kurdish city of Irbil in 1996 was seen as a necessary response to rebellious Kurds. Since this episode, Arab support for using military force against Saddam has begun to decline.

Many Arabs also believe that the Iraqi people have suffered enough. In addition, they feel that the UN is applying a double standard to Iraq when it fails to force Israel to comply with UN resolutions. Though this latter view is, at least legally-speaking, incorrect, it continues to gain in popularity.

With growing opposition to the embargo among Arabs, the French, the Russians, and others, the political price of another military confrontation with Iraq becomes higher and the credibility of U.S. military threat in the Gulf erodes further.

Background

In October 1997, Saddam Husayn's eviction of the U.S. supervisors on the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) team touched off a serious diplomatic crisis over UN inspection of Iraq's capabilities for producing weapons of mass destruction. The crisis provoked a major show of force by the U.S. military and threatened another war with Baghdad. An intense diplomatic initiative defused the situation temporarily, and UNSCOM has resumed its work. When it comes to the presidential palaces (a major issue of contention), UNSCOM is to be accompanied by an international team of diplomats. UNSCOM's next semi-annual report of its findings is scheduled to be delivered to the Security Council in October 1998. At the center of the conflict is the enigmatic figure of Saddam, president of Iraq and commander-in-chief of the Iraqi Armed Forces. Saddam tightly controls decision-making in Iraq and has made the use of force his primary tool in foreign and domestic policy, as is evidenced by the Iran-Iraq war, the invasion of Kuwait, and the military suppression of revolts from the Shi'i and Kurdish communities. Clearly, the threat of further military confrontation with Saddam and the Iraqi Armed Forces is palpable.

Part One: Chinks in Saddam's Armor

I. The Shi'is and the Kurds: Iraq's demographic predicament and its implications

Three times in its brief history as a nation-state, once at the beginning of the century and twice toward its end, Iraq saw massive Shi'i revolts that left behind much devastation and misery. In each case it was the Shi'i population of the south that brought things to a head and that was at the receiving end of very harsh reprisals. The differences between the two sects are primarily theological, emanating from a political dispute in the seventh century A.D. over who deserved to be the prophet Muhammad's successor (Caliph). Over time, this political dispute took on theological dimensions and created heavy antagonism and mistrust. While both communities are Arab and thus share a common language and a rich culture, and while both have lived side by side for hundreds of years, each community has developed a fairly distinct identity.

In 1920 a massive Shi'i revolt against British rule rocked the foundations of the budding British mandate over Mesopotamia-Iraq. By the time the revolt ended, the British were bleeding, the Shi'i population of Iraq was devastated, and the Sunni Arab socioeconomic elite of Baghdad and Mosul, whose contribution to the revolt was modest, received the reins of government on a silver platter. From the British point of view, the Sunni Arabs were better partners and better suited to rule than their Shi'i counterparts. Some Sunnis had far closer ties to the British than the Shi'i did, dating back to the Arab Revolt in the desert and strengthened by T. E. Lawrence ("of Arabia"), among others. They had far greater administrative experience as well, dating back to the days of the Ottoman Empire; and because they possessed a fairly secular, modernizing outlook, they were much closer to the British political mentality. Finally, they were less rebellious than the Shi'is.

Despite occasional resistance, most of the time the Sunni community was willing to tolerate the British in exchange for British support of Sunni supremacy. The only snag in this arrangement was that the Sunni Arabs represented less than 20 percent of the total population, while the Shi'i Arabs represented about 55 percent (the rest being mostly Sunni Kurds). Thus, since 1920-21, the Shi'i Arabs, while being a demographic majority, became a minority-status community. Since World War II, under all other regimes (the monarchy in its late stage, 1946-58; General Qasim, 1958-63; and to an extent the 'Arif brothers, 1963-68) Sunni-Shi'i relations improved and tension was managed reasonably well, but under the Ba'th regime tension was brought to a head a number of times. Large-scale Shi'i unrest followed by severe repression occurred in 1969, 1971-72, 1974, and 1977.

In 1979-80, encouraged by Ayatollah Khomeini's victory in Tehran, the Shi'a of Iraq revolted again against the secular, essentially-Sunni rule of the Ba'th party (1968 to the present) under presidents Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr (1968-1979) and Saddam (1979-present). In retaliation for the rebellion, hundreds were executed, 10,000 were arrested, and at least tens of thousands were deported across the border to Iran. In March 1991, as soon as the Gulf War guns fell silent, a massive Shi'i revolt was crushed once again--at least 30,000

people (and possibly twice as many) died and many fled to Iran again.

The main reason for Shi'i resistance was the Ba'th preoccupation with penetrating and controlling every aspect of society. To achieve this goal, the new regime deprived the more traditional circles among the Shi'i population, led by the clergy, of their autonomy in education and their control over religious endowments (waqf). Once in control of Shi'i education the Ba'th regime was in the position to pull the carpet out from underneath the traditional Shi'i leadership by "re-educating" Shi'i youth. Thus, the Ba'th party's campaign for secularism became an immediate threat to many Shi'is. In addition, Ba'thi suspicion (mostly unfounded at first) of collusion between the Iraqi and Iranian Shi'a led to severe repression, even when Iran was under the secular regime of the Shah. Finally, the more violence the Ba'th employed to suppress Shi'i activities, the more violent Shi'i fundamentalist activists became. Initially, Shi'i activists limited their activities to education and culture, but Ba'th repression prompted them to retaliate in kind.

Young secular Shi'is who wanted to join the Ba'th party were faced with a different problem. During the first years (1968-74) there were no Shi'is at the top of the party's leadership. This created a degree of estrangement even among those Shi'is who were potentially supportive of the regime. Since 1977, under Saddam's influence, a few Shi'is were promoted to prominent positions in party and government. Yet the problem of underrepresentation was solved only very partially. Numerically, there have always been more Sunnis in the highest echelon; they also have nearly monopolized the positions of real power. Shi'is today comprise the majority of lower-rank party membership, but their climb up the party ladder has been perceptibly slower. Finally, in times of crisis involving Iran or the Iraqi Shi'a, many Shi'i party members, including very senior ones, people who had thrown their lot decisively with the regime, have not been fully trusted by their Sunni counterparts. Thus, even though under Saddam Shi'i representation in the corridors of power was given a boost, the situation still falls short of true equal opportunity.

Shi'i unrest in Baghdad was particularly dangerous to the Ba'th regime, as it was fully aware that since the early 1980s some 65-70 percent of the population of the capital were Shi'is and at least 10 percent were Kurds. Thus the Sunni Arab elite found itself a small minority in its own center of power (see [map](#)). Its remedy was, first, to flood the capital with Sunni Arab security forces, drawn mostly from rural tribal areas. The forces' tightest grip has been applied to the neighborhood of the Presidential Palace (see no. 7, [map](#)) and the surrounding quarter, Karadat Maryam and Haifa Street. Second in turn were the over one million Shi'is in the poor quarter of Baghdad known since 1982 as "Saddam's City." Second, the regime made special efforts to improve social services in Baghdad at the expense of the provinces. Third, since the early 1980s, the ruling elite has concentrated in well-defended city quarters protected by special security forces. These quarters include Mujamma' al-Qadisiyya (where the very top echelon resides), Mujamma' Dijla (where the second echelon of government ministers and their colleagues resides), and a less protected quarter called Amirat Street and another near Baghdad University (where a mixture of first and second echelons reside, mostly retired,

artists and other privileged persons). The Ba'th elite has taken shelter in these compounds against potential opponents of all creeds, including Sunni Arabs. Also, when they are concentrated it is easier for Saddam to keep an eye on them. Yet it is significant that all these elite quarters are situated at a safe distance from "Saddam's City" and the old Shi'i quarter of Kazimayn. The compounds are situated in areas where Sunnis represent a significant proportion of the population.

Almost all those who live in these areas--Sunnis, Shi'is, Kurds, and Christians--belong to the well-established strata of Baghdad's old-timers who are far less volatile and less prone to revolt than most other segments of Iraqi society. That the Shi'i potential for revolt, or at least, guerilla activities against the regime played a role in the decision to create the first two compounds also may be inferred from the timing: in 1979-1980, for the first time under the Ba'th regime, the poor Shi'is of Baghdad joined their southern co-religionists and came out in demonstrations against the regime. The early 1980s also saw a number of attacks against government buildings by Shi'i fundamentalists. This is when the compounds came into being.

In 1991, following the Shi'i uprising in the south, the regime added a new security tier. Even though the uprising did not reach Baghdad, Saddam assigned special units to put down any Shi'i insurrection. Thus, by early 1998, the 6th Special Republican Guard Battalion, stationed at al-Rashid barracks, is charged with responsibility to seal off the Shi'i "Saddam City" quarter and bombard it indiscriminately in case of mass revolt, as the Guard did in Najaf and Karbala in 1991. The Tenth Battalion of the SRG is charged with a similar task in the old and religious Shi'i quarter of Kazimayn. The chances of such a revolt are extremely slim, but Saddam and his security chiefs have never taken any chances. This is further indication that the Shi'i issue under this regime is still regarded as a liability.

How does Shi'i-Sunni tension affect Iraq's foreign policy? Due to the traditional connection between the Iranian and Iraqi-Arab Shi'a, the Ba'th regime has always been wary of a Shi'i fifth column inside Iraq. This made every confrontation with Iran more acute than it would otherwise be and any peace-talks more complex and lengthy. The Iraqi Shi'i connection--partly real, but mostly imagined--to Syria's 'Alawi community (a Shi'i offshoot) exacerbated the rivalry with Hafiz al-Asad's regime in Damascus and made a rapprochement more difficult, though not impossible (the 'Alawis are the backbone of Asad's regime). In addition, because Arabism (in language, culture, and national identity) has been the strongest common denominator promoted by the Ba'th as a uniting force binding Sunni and Shi'i Arabs in Iraq, under the Ba'th (and to a lesser degree, previous Iraqi regimes) the main concerns of the Arab world became Iraq's domestic concerns. Thus the single most important all-Arab ideological concern, the "liberation of Palestine," has become a major rallying cry when the regime wanted to win the support of its Shi'a. In this way, Sunni-Shi'i tension became one of the driving forces behind Ba'thi Iraq's anti- Israel ultraradicalism. More generally-speaking, the need to distract the Shi'is continuously, direct their frustration away from the regime creates unstable international relations.

Finally, since 1991 Saddam has used the oil embargo to demonstrate the suffering of "the Iraqi people." While many Sunnis have also suffered, the Shi'i population has suffered most. It is possible that this is not coincidental, i.e., that Saddam is punishing the Shi'a for their disloyalty in 1991. At the heart of this darkness are the marsh Arabs, but many other Shi'is have also been at the receiving end of great calamity. Almost all the cities of the south suffered heavy damage when the Republican Guard crushed the 1991 Intifada, and reconstruction is very slow. There is also partial evidence, (which this author is trying now to substantiate [more comprehensive findings will appear in a forthcoming monograph]), that due to the regime's conscious policies nutrition levels in the Shi'i towns of the south are lower than anywhere else in Iraq. Rations provided by UNSC Resolution 986 are distributed equitably but the regime provides its supporters with extra rations. In Baghdad, "Saddam's City" (a Shi'i quarter) seems to be hit hardest. Likewise, water purification there appears to be at a lower level than in other parts of Baghdad. The regime is said to take respectable UN humanitarian officials and other international bodies to such places as "Saddam's City", Karbala and other Shi'i towns in order to exhibit the (very real!) suffering of the "Iraqi people," who, it turns out, are mostly Iraqi Shi'is. (See for example, *Evaluation of the Food & Nutrition Situation in Iraq*, a technical report prepared by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Rome, 1997, pp. 1, 45, 54. In a personal interview with one of the authors it was confirmed that in Baghdad only children from "Saddam's City" were examined in 1997.) If true, then this may explain Saddam's ability to ride the storm of the embargo. On the one hand, his mostly Sunni-Arab support-base suffers least. Some of them do not suffer at all. On the other, the poor Shi'is of "Saddam's City" and the educated Shi'is of the southern cities, who suffer most, are powerless to undermine his rule. At the same time, they serve to demonstrate the devastating effect of the embargo and justify the regime's demand to lift it.

The Sunni-Shi'i divide is not absolute, nor is it always the most important social fault line in Iraq: The gulf between the poor and the rich in Baghdad, for example, often overshadows the Sunni-Shi'i distinction. Likewise, the differences between the more cosmopolitan capital old-timers and the traditional, partially tribal people of the countryside are deep and meaningful, in many cases overriding the denominational dividing lines. However, as long as Iraq is not a democracy, the Sunni-Shi'i divide poses a meaningful threat to its national unity and adversely affects Iraq's foreign relations. The Shi'i (and Kurdish) Intifada against the Ba'th regime in March-April 1991 provided a violent reminder that this, indeed, is still the case.

II. Saddam and the Kurds after the Gulf War

Less spectacular, but much more frequent and long-lasting and with equally devastating results, were the revolts of the Kurds, first against the British, then against the Arab regimes in Baghdad. The price the Kurds paid for their revolt in the 1980s was no fewer than 100,000 dead (according to a number of sources, the death toll reached 180,000). This included the gas attack against Halabja (in which the Iranians also used poison gas) and a number of Iraqi

government gas attacks against Kurdish villages along the Iraqi-Turkish border after the Iraqi-Iranian cease-fire. There were other, much more important reasons for the 1980 invasion of Iran, but Khomeini's support for the Kurds was certainly contributory.

How does the Kurdish issue affect Iraqi foreign policy today? Kurdish self-rule in Kurdistan under U.S.-British protection is a major irritant to Saddam and his regime. Iraqi actions and declarations indicate a strong interest in returning Kurdistan to the control of the central government. The reasons for this strong interest pertain to both national pride and the economy. Losing Kurdistan in 1991 remains a blot on Saddam's honor. After all, it was the way in which he managed the Kuwait crisis which led to the loss of Kurdistan. Also, Turkish forays into Iraqi Kurdistan to destroy bases of the anti-Turkish Workers Party of Kurdistan (the PKK, a terrorist group) are seen by Baghdad as a serious infringement of Iraqi sovereignty and a major embarrassment for Saddam Husayn. Iranian influence in Kurdistan, too, poses a major challenge to Saddam's statesmanship in the eyes of his power base because it represents a humiliating loss of sovereignty to a hated neighbor. By controlling Kurdistan, the central government would also be able to gain many millions of dollars which, at present, are being reaped by Mas'ud Barazani's Kurds (the Kurdish Democratic Party, or KDP), who control the semi-legal oil trade with Turkey through the Iraqi border town of Zakhu.

Paradoxically, however, Kurdish autonomy also holds some promise for the Iraqi president. Left to its own designs, Turkey might be happy to see Saddam return to Kurdistan in the belief that he will prevent Kurdish independence and put an end to the PKK presence there. There is also potential for a major victory if Saddam succeeds where the United States and Britain have failed so far, namely, in mediating between the two warring Kurdish camps: the KDP and Jalal Talabani's Popular Union of Kurdistan. Through such mediation, along with intimidation, he may be able to return to Kurdistan peacefully, as an arbiter, never to leave it again. Saddam's chances of coercing the Kurds into accepting his rule again will be greatly enhanced once the oil embargo is lifted. Presently, under UNSC Resolutions 986 and 1153 the autonomous Kurdish zone is receiving humanitarian aid as part of the food-for-oil arrangement (13 percent of the total and 19.7 percent of what Iraq actually gets). Once the arrangement is off, the Kurds will be left with no aid at all.

III. Shi'is, Kurds, democracy, and violence in Iraq

Despite Saddam's limited success in introducing Shi'is into the corridors of power, and despite his "return to Islam" since 1991, the Ba'th regime still relies upon a Sunni Arab near-monopoly on power. It still terrorizes the population, and continues its extreme policies of social intervention. Expecting Saddam and his regime to democratize is thus not realistic. A monopoly on power (and to a large extent on wealth) is too much of a temptation. Any democratization process would seriously jeopardize the privileges of those in power. This also means that violence, occasionally of an extreme nature, is likely to be used by the regime in cases of Shi'i and Kurdish unrest, or even insurrection by disaffected Sunni Arab tribal groups. In a more democratic regime, in which

men and women of all communities have equal opportunities for upward social mobility in all realms of society, Sunni-Shi'i-Kurdish tensions are bound to diminish and eventually disappear. This will happen when all Iraqis are treated equally as Iraqis and when advancement is based on merit rather than on loyalty, ethnic or denominational affiliation. Hopefully, by then calculating the percentage of Shi'is, Sunnis, or Kurds in senior government positions will lose its political significance.

IV. The fruits of dictatorship: Saddam's decision-making process as a source of high-risk, high-cost policies

Saddam's decisions may be partitioned, if somewhat crudely, into two categories: dramatic decisions and routine ones. His most crucial and dramatic decisions have been made with very little consultation, if any. Most other decisions are discussed and weighed carefully with his specialist advisers. All the dramatic decisions have been made when the leader felt omnipotent and invincible, while at the same time his pride was hurt, and he believed that he and Iraq were being wronged. The dramatic decisions usually led to disaster. The more routine decision-making, which involved extensive consultation, was typical of times when the consensus in the ruling elite was that Iraq was in trouble. The decisions made this way were, on the whole, rational, pragmatic, and sometimes shrewd, and more often than not, they led to political successes. The exceptions were moments when Saddam became angry and impatient, and decided on a clearly unwise step. While rare, such cases did occur even when all were aware of Iraq's vulnerability.

The dramatic decision to invade Iran was Saddam's first important foreign policy decision as president. Just over a year in office, he plunged his country into a full-fledged war with a country three times Iraq's size and in the middle of a revolutionary upheaval. This decision was made without any consultation. When Saddam's advisers realized that his mind was made up, they dared not to antagonize him; only a year earlier he had executed fifty-five senior party officials and army officers for voicing opposition to an important decision he had made. However, during the eight years of the Iraq-Iran war, when all agreed that Iraq was in trouble, more and more decisions were made collectively. They were pragmatic, improving Iraq's international relations and thus its position in the war.

The decision to invade Kuwait was made in consultation with three people, two of whom had, in fact, no say at all. These were Husayn Kamil, his young and docile cousin and son-in-law, and General Iyad Khalifa al-Rawi, commander of the Republican Guard, a professional soldier with no political experience or power. The third, Saddam's cousin 'Ali Hasan al-Majid, was totally innocent of any understanding and knowledge of international relations or military affairs. Saddam's next major decision was to stand ground in Kuwait and risk war, rather than withdraw peacefully. It is not known how this decision was made, but nowhere is there an indication that he consulted with the Regional Leadership (RL) of the ruling party, the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), or the General Staff of the army.

Subsequently, however, there have been many indications that the more important decisions--such as how to control inflation and run the economy or how to deal with the UN as long as Iraq is under the international embargo and under a credible U.S. military threat--were made in real consultation at least with a few of his top specialist advisers and, possibly, with some of the members of the RCC and RL. However, as a rule, when his advisers feel that the leader's mind is made up they agree with him. They prefer to go down with the ship eventually rather than be tossed overboard immediately. This apparently was the case with Saddam's decision to send his troops once again to the Kuwait border in October 1994, a clearly unwise and very damaging decision. The price both Iraq and the international community have paid for this lack of checks and balances in the system is very high. It may even go higher if and when Saddam feels strong and influential again.

V. Saddam and his army officers

Before he was promoted to the rank of a four-star general in 1976, and to staff field marshal in 1979, Saddam Husayn never served in the armed forces as a soldier or as an officer. This is a serious handicap in Iraqi society generally, and in his hometown of Tikrit, a small town that contributed a disproportionately high number of officers to the armed forces. The armed forces have always been a source of pride, and army officers have always enjoyed great prestige in Iraq. As a youth Saddam was fascinated by his uncle's stories about the war against the British in 1941. In school, he was taught about the glory that was ancient Babylon (today seventy miles south of Baghdad) as well as about the great Arab-Islamic battles and conquests under the Prophet and his "successors" (Caliphs). As is evident from his artistic initiatives, his fascination with military uniforms and insignia, and his strong inclination to settle international disagreements through military force, Saddam has never outgrown these childhood images of military exploits.



This drawing, by Mahmud Hamad, appeared in al-Thawra, the Ba'th party's daily newspaper, on April 29, 1987, one day after Saddam's fiftieth birthday. Saddam quenches the thirst of an Arab girl planted in the middle of the map of the arid Arab homeland. The girl, symbolizing the whole Arab nation from Morocco to Syria and Saudi Arabia, raises her hands in enthusiasm and gratitude, striking home the point that Saddam is father, provider, and protector of all Arabs.

During the first stages of the Iraq-Iran war Saddam disciplined his army officers in Stalinist fashion. When an officer gave a retreat order without his permission, or when a unit surrendered, the responsible parties were summarily executed. Much like the Soviet precedent, this did not help the Iraqi army, but it was a useful way to demonstrate who the boss was to hostile officers. In later years Saddam occasionally humiliated his army officers to drive home the same point. For instance, he constantly demanded that they declare him responsible for all military successes and confirm in hindsight that he knew better than they did how to conduct this or that campaign. He nominated as ministers of defense his cousins, Husayn Kamil and 'Ali Hasan Majid, who had no military experience to speak of, in defiance of an old Iraqi tradition of appointing ex-army generals to this position. In 1991 he even nominated his loyal friend 'Izzat Ibrahim, who had never served in the army, as his deputy commander in chief of the armed forces and elevated him to four-star general.

During and after the war with Iran, and following the Gulf War, the Iraqi president met occasionally with his senior army officers to teach them how to conduct modern warfare. They paid him the utmost deference as a great military leader, thus portraying very clearly the public image he desired most. Indeed, throughout the war, as well as the interwar period, the Iraqi media portrayed the president as a great warrior, equal to, and sometimes greater than the Sumerian kings of the third millennium BC, Sargon the Akkadian, Hammurabi the Babylonian, the great Assyrian warrior-kings, Nebudchadnezzar the Chaldean, and many early Islamic war heroes.

But the reality of the Iraq-Iran war, as well as that of the Gulf War, could not escape the officers. The fact that the Iraq-Iran war ended in a draw, despite the overwhelming Iraqi advantage in equipment and organization, was a major embarrassment for Saddam. At the end of the war Saddam dismissed older soldiers but otherwise he upgraded his conventional army and invested huge sums in developing his non-conventional arsenal, a fact that may indicate he was preparing for a new war. For defensive purposes alone such military aggrandizement was totally unnecessary. In his speeches following the invasion of Kuwait there is additional evidence that Saddam felt the need to prove what he failed to prove in his war with Iran. Namely, that he could win a decisive victory that would transform Iraq into the hegemonic military and political power in the Gulf area, and then in much of the Middle East and the Islamic world. It may be suggested, one of the more important reasons for the invasion of Kuwait was Saddam's need to prove to his skeptical officers that he was, indeed, what his loyal media portrayed him to be: a warrior and strategist of historic proportions. Thus, a leadership handicap seems to have played a major role in foreign policy decision-making.

How does the tension between Saddam and his army officers affect Iraqi politics in 1997-98? An important reason (though, clearly, not the only one) for Saddam's intransigence in regard to his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is that he believes (correctly, according to some evidence) that his officers' corps blames him for undermining Iraq's military prowess. Due to his mistaken decisions in 1990-91, Iraq lost many of its conventional as well as non-

conventional forces. Army officers are responsible for maintaining national security, and Saddam has seriously undermined their ability to carry out that duty. Since 1990 there have been at least four cases in which senior and mid-level army officers prepared coups d'état against Saddam. Hundreds of officers were arrested, and many scores were executed, including some members of the Republican Guard and the Special Republican Guard (Saddam's two most loyal and best-trained and -supplied military units). Saddam thus feels pressed to retain as much as possible of Iraq's non-conventional arsenal. This prevents him from getting the oil embargo lifted and repeatedly pits him against the United Nations.

VI. An inability to learn: Tactical successes and a strategic bottleneck

Saddam's learning curve is quite impressive when it comes to tactical lessons, but he seems to be unable to learn more profound lessons. His long-term behavior is repetitive, even though his tactical decision-making process is improving constantly. As pointed out above, when he feels threatened in situations where danger is clear and present, Saddam's behavior is usually careful and calculating. He consults with his own people as well as with friendly foreign powers like France and Russia--and usually his decisions bear good results. But all these decisions are tactical ones. When it comes to his strategic outlook, or what might be defined as his vision of history and his role in it, he hasn't changed much since he became president in 1979. Saddam sees himself, and Iraq under him, as leader of the Arabs and, occasionally, of all Muslims. As he sees it, the combination of Gulf money that would result from his hegemony in the Gulf and Iraqi military prowess would help him achieve this dream.

Saddam's vision of Iraqi leadership of the Arabs was exposed first in his speeches a few months before he became president in July 1979. During the Iraq-Iran war, the Iraqi media under Saddam's guiding hand, presented Iraq as protector and leader of all the Arabs. Iraqi journalists under the Ba'th have always been extremely adept at portraying the leader precisely the way he wanted it to be portrayed. They have been regularly briefed, and their careers, sometimes their freedom, have depended on how accurately they reflected the president's line in their articles and political cartoons and drawings (see drawing). In 1989 and 1990, the Iraqi media and Saddam's public speeches referred to Iraq's non-conventional arsenal as the means by which Iraq would defend all Arabs against Iran and Israel and achieve Arab leadership. It is also clear from these speeches that for Saddam, the way to glory is through military aggrandizement and, when necessary, the actual use of force. In addition, his later speeches during the Kuwait crisis suggest that Saddam aspired to be leader of all the Muslims.

By describing the Iraqis occasionally as "great builders and swords," and by sponsoring highly militaristic monuments, the Iraqi president suggests a very problematic, warlike vision of himself and his people. This strategic vision and historical role also explains his great attachment to weapons of mass destruction. Saddam appears unable to reach the conclusion that, in the third millennium, national greatness may be achieved through economic and

peaceful technological development rather than through war. Defying United Nations Special Commission's inspectors for seven years has cost Iraq already some \$110 billion. With this money Saddam could have built an effective conventional army that could easily defend Iraq against any regional threat. At the same time, he could have paid off much of his international debt and revived Iraq's stagnant economy. This is a lesson he seems unable to learn, however. Even if, eventually, he discloses sufficient information regarding his WMD's to get a "clean bill of health" from an exasperated and forsaken UNSCOM, it is doubtful that he will change his priorities.

VII. The economy: Vulnerability to inflation and its implications for foreign policy

Saddam accepted the "oil for food" principle embodied in UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 986 after long procrastination and with extreme reluctance because it threatened to remove the humanitarian consideration behind his demand to end the oil embargo. He had no choice but to accept the resolution because without it Iraq's currency would have evaporated. Once he no longer had the resources to support the dinar, both the international community and the Iraqi public lost faith in it. Only with the support of renewed oil revenues could the dinar be salvaged. The dinar could be saved from hyperinflation only if Saddam was ready to implement Resolution 986. This means that Saddam is not at liberty now to reject Resolution 986. However, he sabotages it occasionally in order to keep a high level of suffering among the majority of the Iraqi people, thus increasing pressure on the UN to lift the oil embargo completely.

Inflation remains under control all the same because currency speculators know that Saddam can, with a stroke of his pen, fully reactivate the resolution and back up the dinar with Iraq's oil revenues. Officially Iraq accepted the February 1998 UNSC Resolution 1153, which more than doubles the amount of oil he can sell. The resolution was adopted by the Security Council to enable Iraq to buy more food, medicine, and nonmilitary technology through the United Nations to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people. The resolution is unpopular with Saddam, however, because it may eliminate the regime's argument that the suffering of the Iraqi people makes it imperative to lift the embargo, thus prolonging indefinitely a situation in which Saddam cannot use his oil revenues as he wishes (according to Resolution 986, all the revenues go into a United Nations escrow account, and the U.N. supervises all contracts). If past cases serve as an indication, however, then he is under substantial pressure (if cautiously applied) from his economists and oil experts to take advantage of the new resolution to re-invigorate the ailing oil industry. This way, when the oil embargo is at long last lifted (because Iraq receives a "clean bill of health" from UNSCOM or because it manages to bust the embargo somehow), Iraq will be able to immediately export large quantities of oil. In a depressed oil market, such an ability is crucial in order to rebuild Iraq's market share and generate much-needed income.

Part Two: Domestic, Regional, and Foreign Sources of Power

VIII. Saddam's power base: the family-tribe-state symbiosis and how it can explain his survival

When the Ba'th party came to power it immediately established a reign of terror unprecedented in Iraqi history. Real and perceived enemies of the party, including pro-Syrian party old-timers, were jailed, executed, or assassinated. Counterrevolutionaries and "spies" were publicly hanged. But inside the party a degree of democracy was maintained. Even though the senior leadership was obeyed without too many questions, as befits a clandestine, hierarchical, closely knit party, political discussions at the top were fairly democratic. Likewise, while men hailing from President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr's and Saddam's hometown of Tikrit and its environs were particularly visible, the leadership (the RCC and RL, but also lower echelons) consisted of representatives of most Sunni Arab regions of Iraq. The senior leadership consisted of a majority of non-tribal city people, with some meaningful representation of rural, tribal elements. Many of the latter, however, took very seriously the party's modern, integrationist slogans and tended to ignore their tribal connections, in favor of all-Arab and all-Iraqi identities.

Saddam's own tribe, al-bu Nasir, is a small one, numbering no more than 25,000. It is located in and around Tikrit, about one hundred miles north of Baghdad. Other tribes supportive of the regime are the Shammar Jarba, northwest of the capital, and the Dulaym, west and northwest of the capital along the Euphrates. Both are very large tribal federations. Smaller but still very important tribes are the Jubbur, who are concentrated in three different areas, one immediately south of the capital, one a hundred and fifty miles north of the capital near the Tigris, and one around Mosul; the 'Ubayd, about fifty miles north of the capital, east of the Tigris; the 'Azza, the Khazraj, and the Mushahida (all Sunni Arab tribes); and the Banu Hasan and Aal Ribbat in the Shi'i south. To guarantee their loyalty, Saddam has rewarded these tribes. The families of his internal security units (the Republican and Special Republican Guards; the Special Security and the Palaces Guard, who are in charge of his immediate safety; and various other units) are provided with more economic benefits than any other group in Iraq.

Under Saddam's guiding hand, the 1970s saw a combination of two mutually reinforcing processes: the gradual Tikritization and tribalization of the regime's internal security apparatuses (that is, the recruitment of young men hailing from Tikrit as well as men with tribal backgrounds from other Sunni Arab areas), and the decline of party democracy. In other words, the vicious dictatorship practiced by the party on its perimeter eventually permeated its own ranks. Ostensibly, representation at the top of official party and regime hierarchy became more diffuse, as Shi'is started to surface there, but real power became a monopoly of the new president, his family and tribe, and a coalition of mainly Sunni Arab tribes.

The party is still assigned important security and propaganda responsibilities,

but lower down the scale, at the grass-root level. At the helm in Baghdad is one man: the president, who imposes his will on the party luminaries, the army officers' corps, and the nation through his family, which controls the rural tribal praetorian guard. For security reasons, Saddam has surrounded himself with young men from his own tribe (whom he trusts most) and members of neighboring tribes. Saddam arranged political marriages to cement his alliance with his extended family and tribe; however, this tactic backfired in most cases. Much more successful was his policy of providing lavish perks in return for loyal service and threatening severe punishment for treason. Young rural men with little education are recruited to serve in prestigious, high-paying, and all-powerful security units in the heart of the rich capital city. They are feared by the urban population, whom they regard as supercilious. Such power is intoxicating and, combined with the deterrent of severe punishment for insubordination, explains the loyalty of Saddam's security forces. To buttress this loyalty, however, Saddam has had his security forces perform sufficient atrocities in his service as to ensure that they have nowhere else to go.

According to a rough estimate, Saddam needs to shield about one million people from the ravages of the embargo in order to perpetuate his regime. This may explain how he has managed to survive during the seven years of embargo and how he can continue to defy the U.N. without losing power. All the same, however, between 1990 and 1998 Saddam lost some support in his own tribe, as well as among nontribal Tikritis. He also lost some support in the Dulaym, the Jubbur, and the 'Ubayd. This happened as a result of his failure to win a decisive victory over Iran and, later, disenchantment over his policies during and after the Gulf War. When he executed opponents, real and imagined, who hailed from these tribes, he created crisis situations that antagonized certain elements within them. However, by spring 1998 all the existing evidence indicates that these crises have been managed well and tribal resentment has been contained. The same applies to major crises inside his own extended family, including mutual shoot-outs between his eldest son, 'Udayy, and his brother Watban, and the defection, return and assassination of General Husayn Kamil and his family. In 1998 it appears that this crisis has also been effectively contained.

IX. Iraq's non-conventional arsenal: Between impediment and advantage

Saddam started developing both Iraq's biological and nuclear arsenals in 1972. Though it took more than 15 years to develop significant breakthroughs, the immediate reason for embarking on both projects seems to have been Iraq's isolation internationally and within the Arab world in the face of Iran's expansion into the three strategic islands on the Gulf in November 1971--Abu Musa, and the Lesser and the Greater Tunbs. Iraq considered Iran's occupation of these islands to be a major threat because it gave Iran the power to block entrance to the Persian Gulf from the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. Iraq developed its non-conventional arsenals as a "strategic equalizer" to counter Iran's superiority in conventional forces, naval power, and economic and human resources. Some of Saddam's later speeches indicate that these arsenals were also meant to become Iraq's answer to Israeli nuclear development. For instance, in April-May 1990, Saddam defined

Iraq (with its chemical weapons) as the protector of all Arabs against Israel, thus implying that his Arab leadership will evolve from his access to non-conventional weapons.

How were the Iraqis going to use these weapons, combined with their missile force, in order to achieve a hegemonic position? A partial answer to this question was provided by Saddam himself, as well as by some of his strategic advisers, in 1989 and 1990. In a series of Presidential interviews and speeches, and in experts' articles in the Iraqi press, a very unsettling picture emerged. Mostly by implication it became clear that just before he invaded Kuwait, the Iraqi president considered the possibility of using his non-conventional arsenal to coerce Israel into withdrawing from the West Bank. This non-conventional compellence strategy has never been put to the test, and it is not clear how serious Saddam was when he implied it, but the implication alone is cause for serious concern.

Iraqi strategic experts developed an alternative scenario, published in the Iraqi press, according to which Iraq's non-conventional weapons would serve to neutralize Israel's nuclear weapons; instead of coercion, this scenario relied on the logic of mutually assured destruction. In this scenario, the Arab conventional armies would defeat Israel on the battlefield and liberate the whole of Palestine. It has to be emphasized that UNSCOM did not find any classified documents relating to Iraq's theory of action in this realm, except for one or two interviews according to which commanders of non-conventional missile batteries were instructed to hit Israel under two sets of circumstances: (a) if communications with Baghdad were severed following a nuclear attack on Iraq; and (b) if Baghdad were under an immediate threat by the coalition land troops. Namely: Saddam's non-conventional arsenal is, in the first place, developed for regime- protection. This means that we do not know to what extent the press articles published by the strategic experts reflect the modus operandi of Iraq's leadership. Still, the Iraqi leadership has proved that it does not hesitate to use non-conventional weapons as long as it believes that the enemy is not capable of a similar response. This was the case during the Iraq-Iran war, as well as in August-September 1988, when Iraqi Kurds were hit with poison gas attacks. The reason why Saddam was careful not to use such weapons during the Gulf War is simple: Such use would have triggered severe U.S. and Israeli reactions and could have served as sufficient justification for the occupation of Baghdad. So far then, Saddam has been a rational, if brutal, "player."

Unless pushed to the very brink of defeat or extinction, it is likely that he will never use non-conventional weapons overtly against an enemy that can retaliate in kind. There are, however, other possibilities. Saddam may use biological weapons covertly by disguising their source. He may also threaten to use WMDs when he has enough of them to achieve political goals, relying on international reluctance to make counterthreats or to retaliate in kind in case of war. The West is reluctant (with good reason) to punish the Iraqi people for the crimes of a leader they cannot control, and Saddam may use his people again as "living shields," this time in the game of non-conventional threats.

How far has Iraq managed to develop its non-conventional arsenal? According to UNSCOM reports in 1996-97, Iraq is capable of producing its own missile airframe and engines, as well as warheads that can carry chemical and biological substances. The chemical warheads, however, have never been tested in a systematic fashion, and the bacteriological ones apparently have never been tested at all. Iraq produced large quantities of weaponized anthrax and botulinum toxin, as well as a number of poison gases, the most lethal of which is VX. Finally, Iraq is believed by most experts to have been less than a year away from a crude nuclear implosion mechanism. They had enough enriched uranium for one nuclear device, but their uranium enrichment facilities were at a fairly early stage.

Until recently, Iraq's non-conventional arsenal was only a source of trouble for Saddam: it kept the embargo going and cemented the international coalition against him. Since 1996-97, however, the coalition has frayed and, as will be shown below, Arab support for a military strike against Iraq is dissipating. Some of the Arab Gulf states have changed their political agenda at least partially, apparently because they have gotten used to the idea that Saddam's biological and chemical WMD are there to stay. Under such circumstances, they seem to feel that they had better mend their fences with him now, before it is too late. Thus, the perception of Iraq's future non-conventional capabilities is already helping Saddam in his effort to reintegrate Iraq into the Arab world and lift the embargo.

X. A shift in Arab attitudes

Starting in August-September 1996, when Saddam's Republican Guard attacked the Kurdish city of Irbil, a major shift in Arab public opinion and regimes' behavior has been under way. Saddam's troops, in collaboration with one Kurdish faction (Masud Barazani's Kurdish Democratic Party), defeated another Kurdish group (Jalal Talabani's Popular Union of Kurdistan), destroyed a CIA operation in Iraqi Kurdistan, and devastated the Iraqi National Congress, a liberal opposition group working in Kurdistan against the Iraqi regime. In 1996 all Arab regimes, except Kuwait's, objected to the use of military force against Iraq. For most Gulf regimes this objection was intended mostly for public consumption. In private these regimes favored a massive strike against Saddam's forces that would weaken his hold on power.

However, because Saddam's Irbil operation was widely seen as reimposing the control of the central Arab government on a rebellious Kurdish zone of Iraq, punishing Saddam was highly unpopular. One might have expected that the protracted crisis between the U.N. and Iraq between November 1997 and February 1998 would have turned out differently. After all, this time the confrontation was not over Kurdish secessionists, but rather over Iraq's non-conventional arsenal. This arsenal can still be used against Gulf states and Iran, and as such they have vested interest in seeing it dismantled. All the same, however, military action against Iraq became extremely unpopular among Arabs across the region, and all Arab governments, save Kuwait again, opposed it.

Here again, the public positions were not identical with those expressed in private. According to senior U.S. officials, in the case of war, the United States was promised all the support from its Gulf allies that it needed; significantly, Egypt never threatened to block the Suez Canal to U.S. war vessels. However well founded this information was, now the political cost of a military strike against Iraq is very high. Arab public opinion perceives the Iraqi people (as distinct from the regime, but sometimes including Saddam, too) as victims, and accuses the United States and Britain of employing a double standard: They threaten Iraq with military action for its noncompliance with UNSC resolutions, but refrain from doing so against Benjamin Netanyahu's government in Israel. This accusation overlooks an important legal distinction: UNSC resolutions vis-a-vis Iraq in the context of the Kuwait crisis of 1990–1991 are based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which deals with cases of aggression and requires the UN to "make recommendations, or decide what measures [possibly sanctions] shall be taken...to maintain or restore international peace and security". (For example Resolution 661 of 6 August 1990.) In contrast Resolution 242 (known also as the "Land for Peace" Resolution) is based on Chapter VI which calls for Pacific Settlement of Disputes, through negotiated, mediated solutions, etc. Except for one UNSC resolution regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict (demanding an Arab–Israeli truce in 1948) no UNSC resolution regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict is based on Chapter VII. Still, legal issues aside, politically speaking the "double standard" argument carries weight because it became extremely popular among Arab intellectuals, diplomats and politicians.

But even without al-Jazira, the United States' insistence on maintaining the oil embargo until Iraq comes clean about its WMD draws more and more Arab fire. Certain Arab governments object to any use of force against Iraq, mainly because they fear public opinion at home. Jordan is probably the most extreme such example: King Hussein would like to see a new regime in Baghdad, but a military operation against Saddam threatens internal stability in Jordan. (To a lesser extent this is also the case with Egypt and Syria). Only by disassociating themselves very clearly from a military operation can these regimes dampen public protest. Syria went even further by advocating the immediate lifting of the embargo.

The regimes of the Gulf states, while wary of popular protests, seem to be mostly concerned with the danger of Saddam's returning to the Arab arena as a regional superpower. To avoid his wrath, they feel that they need to normalize relations with him before his comeback. Saudi Arabia is also seriously concerned about its domestic Islamist opposition, which objects ferociously to any U.S. presence on Saudi territory. With Prince Abd Allah as the new power behind the throne, Saudi policies are undergoing a subtle shift from near total reliance on the United States to partial reliance on friendly Arab regimes, particularly Egypt and Syria. And because the latter oppose a military operation under any circumstances, this affects the Saudi position. Recently, Saudi Arabia significantly improved its relations with Iran, apparently as insurance against the possibility of a reduced U.S. commitment to Saudi Arabia's security or in the event that, because of public outcry, the regime would be unable to ask for U.S. help.

Finally, there is a subtle though very clear shift in the way a number of Arab publicly relate to Saddam and his regime in radio and television interviews. Until a few months ago, the usual way to address Baghdad was as "the Iraqi regime"; lately, one increasingly hears inferences to Saddam as "the Iraqi leadership." In Arabic, this terminology implies a shift toward acceptance and normalization. In addition to Russia's and France's qualified support and clear-cut objections to the use of force by the United States, this shift in Arab attitudes is imposing serious constraints on U.S. foreign policy decision-making. Under a credible threat of massive aerial attack the chances that Saddam would allow the UNSCOM inspectors to operate in Iraq are good; the Iraqi leader has excellent reasons to make meaningful concessions in order to avoid war. However, due to the higher political price the United States will have to pay for such an attack in 1998-99, the credibility of the U.S. military threat is eroding. Under such circumstances, if he cannot get UNSCOM to provide him with a "clean bill of health," before he finally gives up his WMDs Saddam may be tempted to call what he would probably consider to be an U.S. bluff.

About the Report

This report was written by Amatzia Baram, senior fellow in the [Jennings Randolph Program](#) at the United States Institute of Peace and professor of Middle Eastern history at the [University of Haifa](#) in Israel. Baram is considered one of the world's leading authorities on Iraq. This analysis provides a useful backdrop to the ongoing conflict with Iraq and is intended to help interested observers understand the significance of Saddam Husayn in Iraqi politics and the forces with which he grapples as he makes decisions about compliance with international demands. The views expressed here belong to the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the U.S. Institute of Peace.

The report represents work in progress and summarizes the main points made during two public discussions about the nature of domestic politics in Iraq under Saddam. The Institute-sponsored meetings, November 10, 1997, and April 9, 1998, featured Baram presenting a modified version of his fellowship project that focuses on the major domestic conflicts that Saddam's regime faces and how they factor into Iraq's current and future foreign policy interests. Other participants at these events included representatives from the U.S. Department of State, the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Middle East Institute, and other policy organizations active in U.S. foreign policy toward Iraq. C-Span covered and broadcast both events. Special thanks to John Crist, program officer in the Jennings Randolph Fellowship Program, for his contributions in preparing this report.

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