

Iraqi Reflections of the Crisis

Ofra Bengio

I will address here, briefly, four topics: the alternatives or challenges faced by Saddam Hussein; how he is preparing for these moves; how he is dealing with the inspection issue – whether there has been any change in his operating patterns; and perhaps I may also be able to touch upon the question that so preoccupies this forum: is democracy possible in Iraq, with or without Saddam.

For an old warhorse like Saddam Hussein there is little new in the present crisis and struggle. He may be said to have faced three situations: in the Iran-Iraq War he had to choose between losing power and continuing the war, so of course he did the latter until Homeini himself decided to put an end to the war and drank the poisoned chalice. In the Gulf War Saddam again had two alternatives: to concede Kuwait or go to war. He finally preferred not to leave Kuwait but to unleash war – and ended up as he did.

Today he is faced with three challenges, of which he must choose the lesser evil. The first, as before, is to lose power, the second is to part with his unconventional weapons, and the third is war. Has this different situation also changed the pattern of his behavior?

My assessment is that even by this stage some of this pattern has changed. Everyone supposes that with his back to the wall, Saddam will take the awful step of using chemical and biological weapons. But as I see it, the more he is put under pressure the more ground he slowly gives, and so he has done in the controversy around the inspectors.

I would also like to make the highly risky prediction that from Saddam's angle, of those three alternatives the least dangerous is to disarm, followed by a war, and only at the very last extreme will he really relinquish power. That prediction may be quite a gamble, but it is my reading of the situation as it stands.

The real question is how Saddam has prepared and how he continues to prepare for these moves. The present confrontation did not take him by surprise; he has been preparing for such a struggle for a long time, including Iraq's outward stance. If the saying goes that the righteous have their work done by others, in Saddam's case it is the wicked who enjoy that privilege. All of a sudden Saddam the bad guy has become the lesser evil – that is, for the

outside world, which is an aspect I will not address. My question is: what has he done internally in order to try and organize for the coming moves, which he foresaw occurring down the line.

Firstly, what has he done at his three power bases: the army, the party and his family including his two sons? As for the party, it has become a hated and immobilized body in Iraq and some revamping was necessary to let it adapt to the changing situation and to the fact that the Iraqi people really despise it. So one of his first was, some time ago, to revitalize its ranks by administering a test to all party members. You will hardly be astonished to hear that the test was about quotations from Saddam Hussein, but that is just the picturesque part.

He also enacted fairly sweeping changes in the party's top echelon, infusing some new blood – among other things by inserting his son Qusai, but other new figures as well. Most interestingly, for this purpose he tapped an important but hitherto neglected group in Iraq: the Shiites, who today have almost equaled the Sunnis in the party top brass. This was a significant step to strengthen his own standing in the party and the party's standing in society – that is, among the Shiites.

Saddam also appointed the first woman to the party leadership, a matter of social significance which I will dwell upon in a moment; but for the party, which has been functioning in Iraq since 1948 it was a precedent – which Saddam chose to initiate in order to spread his appeal as widely as possible.

As far as the army is concerned, here too he infused some fresh blood. In my opinion one of the most important matters was his foresight in predicting that some kind of uprising might occur as it did in 1991 on the part of the Kurds and Shiites. Well, since he has no control over the Kurds he couldn't do much on that quarter. But in the Shiite region and throughout Iraq he appointed military officers as regional chiefs so that in case of any uprising they could handle it.

Of course the continuing separation between his own personal army and the ordinary one is increasingly accentuated. Today, according to some counts, there are some 100,000 men in the special and regular Republican Guard whose exclusive task is to encircle Baghdad or garrison the city in order to protect Saddam's person. This is an ongoing process. You have seen on television the motivation campaigns which he takes care to conduct in the

public eye. In more routine matters, he has divided cities like Basra into several districts, governed by military men, in order to improve control.

Concerning the family, the most important point is that while we note the risks Saddam is facing and consider that his demise will solve the problem, in fact for many years he has seen to it that in case of his removal from the scene there will be an heir. Anyone who tries to contend with Saddam thus has to contend also with the heir, that is with Qusai. Saddam has appointed him to all the key positions in the party, army and security apparatus so that even if the father is gone, Qusai will remain a problem.

Still the family harbors a problem which may become a two-edged sword: I consider it a fact that that some hidden power struggle is taking place between Udai and Qusai. Udai, who was booted into a very minor post, is trying in many ways to improve his standing and thus may be undermining not only Qusai's but even Saddam's own – a matter I will be glad to elaborate upon.

Another important matter that we have witnessed is Saddam's steadily increasing efforts to bolster his popularity. Since 2000 three novels of his – authentic, as he let it be understood, or ghostwritten -- have been published in Iraq. The best-known of these, *Zbeiba and al-Malk* [*Zabiba and the King*] has been staged in Amman, will be produced as I understand in Paris and has been adopted as a mandatory text in Iraqi schools.

I stress this point as the bottom line because it shows Saddam Hussein has understood that ordinary propagandist techniques no longer reach the people and he must employ new methods – of which these novels are one. In this particular case, the heroine Zbeiba sacrifices herself for the king. I hardly need to tell you whom Zbeiba symbolizes and whom the king represents. I leave it to your imagination, and Saddam's.

His next move came before accepting the inspectors and, I believe, was designed to pre-empt it: the referendum in which he won 100% of the vote. In fact he made history when, in one precinct, the computer got carried away with enthusiasm and added its own vote, bringing the total to 101%.

In any event, another move he made while all above were in progress was to release all prison inmates. I cannot confirm that every one of them was indeed released, but in any event this was an appeal to the masses to support Saddam as the people's benefactor. However a large part of the prisoners were soldiers who had deserted during the war, and we do know

4
already that some of these were re-recruited so that this move was very practical.

The social significance of this move, which left the country effectively without a penal system, is yet to be seen and I understand that it has already aroused some resentment. However it was a shoot-from-the-hip improvisation that Saddam had to make, and once made it may very well have been a shrewd one. Among additional measures which he has taken from time to time (and the press reports such changes almost daily) is his decision to abolish the special tribunals which had been a feature of the Ba'ath regime since its inception and were empowered to send anyone to prison or inflict any other punishment they saw fit. Although the permanence of this decision is uncertain it is an interesting point.

He established new universities in remote places such as Kirkuk – or at least declared their establishment; I can't vouch for the implementation. Yet another move was buying off journalists. Saddam could never survive without this fifth column, and there is unabashed discussion today about distribution of real estate in Baghdad. This is a city where no land is available these days, a very problematic situation, but he found vacant plots for these journalists.

Finally, on a rather macabre note: for many years – even before Saddam's accession – if you opened an Iraqi newspaper you saw no advertisements. Recently some have begun to appear, not only commercial publicity for industrialists and the like, but death notices as well.

There may be several reasons for this, including a financial one: for each such notice the press authority collects 6,000 dinars, that is about two dollars – no insubstantial sum. So while allowing what would be simply normal in any other country might seem to indicate a degree of openness, in my opinion it also points to the economic and other difficulties Saddam faces – which is why he chose to open this particular safety valve.

Now to the inspection affair, in which Saddam Hussein is exhibiting a different behavior from the past. For four years he refused to accept them; now he has, and I reiterate that of all the alternatives this seemed the most preferable from his point of view. Unlike the previous situation, the UN is now seen as the best guarantee of his survival in power. Hence the necessity to co-operate.

5

Also, accepting the inspectors let him gain essential time. Nonetheless I consider this was no simple decision for Saddam Hussein, and it demonstrates the kind of twists he has had to make. First of all, up to the very decision to accept the inspectors the Iraqi people was repeatedly told that their entry into such locations as [presidential] palaces would be a violation of Iraqi honor. So how can this dishonor now be explained away?

Furthermore, how can the people be told that after twelve years of suffering sanctions for refusing to open up to inspection, now it is being accepted? How can the loss of inward and outward deterrence, a real problem *vis-a-vis* the army, be dealt with? So even if this was Saddam's default option, he still had to fine-tune it in a very sophisticated way to prevent it from damaging him internally. How was this shock absorbed?

First there was a resolution of the National Assembly to reject inspections, which Saddam Hussein then disregarded in order to show the Iraqi people that he was actually saving them from an impending catastrophe. Interestingly, only Udai's newspaper reported that parliament opposed the inspections; the general press did not publicize the parliamentary resolution, perhaps in an attempt to signal that there was no rift and parliament had entrusted Saddam Hussein with the final decision.

But Saddam Hussein shouldered no responsibility for accepting the inspectors. No Iraqi newspaper in reporting the story even mentioned the name Saddam Hussein. In any newspaper report about the decision to accept the inspectors, not the President is put behind it but his Foreign Minister. The word "acceptance" does not appear in the inspectors' acceptance paper; there is a lot of verbiage on many matters, but only in one unobtrusive place can one it be inferred, reading between the lines, that that indeed the matter had been decided and the die was cast.

Subsequently, for two weeks there was no report in the Iraqi papers that the inspectors had been there at all until suddenly the matter of their acceptance appeared; I believe that now too the press reports very cautiously avoid offending the inspectors. The same technique of revealing concessions only slowly and in small doses was evident also in regard to accepting the U-2 flights after the inspectors had left, or the other things that were done at the very last moment when the hourglass had almost run out.

What is Saddam hoping for? I would say that if a war does occur, he would hope to repeat the achievements of the Gulf War: to the infrastructure

but ensuring his own survival; or – if he is wiped out – to begin preparations for a great revenge to teach the Americans a lesson and if there is an occupation, to make their lives miserable by bringing a clash of civilizations into play.

What happens after Iraq? The idea of democratization is getting a lot of play right now. There are two visions for Iraq, Saddam's and Bush's. According to Saddam's vision, if he is removed from the scene Iraq will disintegrate, anarchy will reign throughout the region and therefore he must remain in power. The American vision holds that if only Saddam Hussein is out of the way an accelerated democratization process can begin in Iraq, making it the first democracy in the Arab world.

As I see it, the prospect of establishing democracy in Iraq seems problematic not because of the much-discussed cultural aspect but due to the country's structural problems. To name but a few, it is a heterogeneous society that has been habituated to be ruled forcibly by the army, and its transition from dictatorship to democracy will require a lot of time.

Another structural problem is the Shiite anomaly, whereby the majority does not rule Iraq. Changing this entire structure means not only fostering democratization but also bringing the Shiites to power. Is anyone willing to undertake such an historic turnaround -- and capable of it?

Another problem is a social one: the lack of a middle class. British attempts to democratize Iraq failed because of the middle class's weakness, and today it is even weaker, almost nonexistent. The question is how long it will take to recover and get back on its feet in order to lead the process.

And politically, Iraq is now a wilderness. There are no political organizations except the Ba'ath (excluding the Kurdish region). Here the great question is: can democracy be made to grow quickly out of this vacuum? Can the Americans succeed where the British failed, or rather where the latter intentionally foiled the emergence of a [genuine] political structure in Iraq?