

# MERIA

## **SADDAM HUSAYN: BETWEEN HIS POWER BASE AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

By Amatzia Baram\*

*Iraq has continued to survive international sanctions and attempts to isolate itself in the decade following the war over Kuwait. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has used Islam and tribalism to maintain power at home, while playing off other countries and seeking humanitarian sympathy to weaken the opposition to his regime from abroad. The article surveys the current state of Iraq's domestic and foreign policies.*

In the year 2000 the domestic and international position of Iraq's ruler, Saddam Husayn, was the most secure and promising since the 1991 Gulf War.

At home, more than three years had passed since any meaningful coup d'etat was exposed--and probably even hatched--against him. Serious Shi'i protests and a wave of guerrilla operations against his forces in the south, but also in Baghdad, had begun to decline. On the economic level, while the stagnation and even slow deterioration of Iraq's economy continued unabated, there were no serious food shortages nor signs of famine and key elements of the country's infrastructure were slowly being reconstructed.

In the inter-Arab arena, Iraq has developed commercial ties and some improvement of diplomatic contacts with a number of Arab countries, including some Gulf emirates, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Since December 1998, there had been no weapons' inspections carried out by the UN Special Committee (UNSCOM). Despite periodic confrontations between Iraqi air defenses and U.S. planes above the Southern and Northern No-Fly Zones, Iraq continued to challenge the overflights.

Furthermore, the United States and Britain came under the greatest international pressure to lift--or at least greatly relax--the international economic embargo against Baghdad. The anti-embargo campaign

brought together those upset by the alleged suffering of Iraq's people and those countries and companies that hoped for huge profits from Iraq's oil industry and reconstruction once sanctions ended.

What is Saddam Husayn's secret? How has he survived a devastating defeat in the Gulf War and almost ten years of a crippling embargo? Why is the U.S. containment policy that was so successful in the early and mid-1990s slowly collapsing?

### **SADDAM HUSAYN'S POWER BASE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

When the Ba'th party came to power in Iraq in July 1968 it was committed to the ideal of unifying the Arab states into one super-state. Very soon, however, it became clear that the only candidates for accepting immediate unification--Syria and Egypt, both governed by regimes not unlike the new regime in Baghdad--posed a grave danger to the fledgling Ba'th rule. Both Gamal Abd al-Nasir and Hafiz al-Asad, the rulers of Egypt and Syria during this period, enjoyed much greater prestige in the Arab world and even inside Iraq. In contrast, the Baghdad leadership was inexperienced and had already lost power once in 1963.

Thus, rather than striving toward unification, the new Iraqi regime turned against Syria and Egypt, accusing them of betraying the most cherished Arab values by failing to defeat Israel in 1967 and of

sabotaging Arab unity in a variety of other ways. With very small fluctuations--mainly in 1978-1979--this pattern of accusations remained Saddam Husayn's policy since he became vice-president of Iraq in 1969 and president in 1979.

Eventually, under Saddam Husayn, Iraq developed a new, Iraqi-centered and imperial brand of pan-Arabism. Its main message was that, due to its heroic and rich history, starting with ancient Sumer and Babylon and ending with Saddam, Iraq is the natural leader of the Arabs. As a result, everything that benefits Iraq will eventually benefit all the Arabs. This message sought to legitimize political maneuvers that clearly contradicted Arab solidarity or seemed to detach Iraq from the struggle against Israel. The invasions of Iran and of Kuwait are two examples of such maneuvers.(1) It is quite possible that this ideological argumentation made it easier for Ba'th party members to stomach the regime's policies, which deviated from traditional pan-Arab values.

Another ideal professed by the new regime was secularism, or the separation of mosque and state.(2) Until the ascendancy of Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini in Tehran Iran in February 1979, this ideal was essentially adhered to in Iraq, even though the Ba'th regime did make changes over time toward involving Islam in politics more than one would expect from a secular nationalistic regime. Baghdad's policy went through a quantum leap when the Ba'thi rulers were pushed by the Islamic regime across the border to demonstrate that they were not, as Tehran claimed, anti-Islamic atheists.

After the government "Islamized" much of its rhetoric during the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War, President Saddam Husayn led the Ba'th party in introducing some Islamic principles into the Iraqi legal system. This started a short while before the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, when Saddam made clear that whenever laws clashed with the divine Shari'a, the former must always give way. One day before the Allied bombing began the fighting in January 1991, Saddam Husayn added the slogan,

"Allahu Akbar" (God is Great) to the Iraqi national flag.(3)

During the war, Saddam's rhetoric was fully Islamized in a way unparalleled by any other Arab secular leader. By implication he presented himself as the modern-day champion of Islam (mujaddid al-din). He promised his warriors that when the battle commenced, God would give them victory as had happened in the seventh-century battle of Badr, when a tiny Muslim army defeated a multitude of Meccan idol worshippers. The president also invoked the memory of a pre-Islamic battle between the Arabs and an Ethiopian invading army that had marched on Mecca with war elephants. The invaders, he promised, would be defeated in the same way that the Ethiopians had been, through a miraculous, divine intervention.(4)

It is not clear how useful these promises and analogies were in raising the troops' morale. From interviews with Iraqi soldiers who served in the war, it emerged that at least some believed these mythological references were a symbolic way to refer to secret Iraqi electronic devices and weapons that could neutralize the American technological advantage. Of course, they were no such weapons.

Following the Iraqi defeat in the war, there was no sign of a return to rational, secular rhetoric. Indeed, in 1994, when the economic embargo resulted in serious inflating and unprecedented suffering among the vast majority of Iraqis, Saddam Husayn went further by introducing punishments such as severing the right hand for theft and the death penalty for prostitution, defining these penalties as Islamic. The Iraqi president also initiated laws forbidding the public consumption of alcohol and introduced enhanced compulsory study of the Qur'an at all educational levels, including in Ba'th party branches. The most amazing step in the same direction was the declaration, in 1989, that before his death the Christian Michel 'Aflaq, founder and chief ideologue of the Ba'th party had converted to Islam. None of the deceased founder's friends or family ever heard about such a momentous decision but this did not

prevent the Ba'th secular regime from making this astounding post-mortem announcement.(5)

It is impossible to gauge the extent to which the "Islamization" steps helped the Iraqi president and his ruling elite stay in power by more effectively legitimizing them. It would seem, however, that such a far-reaching decision had to be based on a rational calculation that more emphasis on Islam would strengthen the regime's popularity

A similar and perhaps more effective strategy, was the selective return to tribal values and, most importantly, to tribal affinities. While the process of Islamization started in earnest only after the Iraq-Iran War, the regime's neo-tribal policies were introduced a few months after it took over in 1968. Contrary to its ideological commitment to socialism, modernity, and anti-tribalism as part of its European-style integrated nationalism (whether Iraqi or pan-Arab), the new regime adopted clear-cut tribal policies.

In a sense, Saddam Husayn's own rise was linked to that factor. In November 1969 little-known, young Saddam Husayn was chosen as vice-president of Iraq, deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC)-the state's supreme, executive, judicial and legislative body-and deputy secretary-general of the all-Iraqi leadership of the Ba'th party. Saddam was already in control of internal security. As reported by a senior Ba'thi official who was then a member of the small Iraqi Regional Leadership of the Ba'th party (RL), Saddam's growing role gained from the relationship between President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and his childhood friend and distant relative, Khayr Allah Talfah, who was also Saddam Husayn's maternal uncle, and in whose home Saddam was raised.

Talfah pointed out to Bakr that the party had once lost power (in November 1963) because it relied too heavily on party loyalty, rather than on family and tribal ties. For a socialist, revolutionary nationalist this was shocking heresy, but Bakr agreed. Saddam was from the same tribe as Bakr. Talfah

suggested his young nephew, and Bakr's fellow tribesman, as Iraq's number-two and assured Bakr that with Saddam Husayn behind him he would never need to look over his shoulder with concern for his life and position.

Since the early 1970s, Saddam Husayn has fortified his position by recruiting young men from his hometown, Tikrit, as his bodyguards. Within the Tikriti population, the innermost circle from which recruits were picked was Al Bu Nasir, the tribe to which both Saddam Husayn and President Bakr belonged. The next phase was to introduce some of these young men into key positions in most of Iraq's internal security bodies. The most important amongst them was Jihaz Hanin (the Apparatus of Yearnings), later to become al-Mukhabarat al-'Amma (General Intelligence), the Ba'th party's intelligence organ that terrorized all of its opponents, as well as most party members.

Later on, members of Saddam's tribe were also injected into al-Amn al-'Amm (General Security), the old, powerful internal security body established by the Iraqi state under the monarchy. When new security bodies were created by the Ba'th regime it was ensured that they would be effectively penetrated and controlled by key officers hailing from Saddam Husayn's tribe. This has been particularly the case with al-Amn al-Khass (Special Security) and al-Haras al-Jumhuri al-Khass (the Special Guard).

During the Iraq-Iran War, al-Bu Nasir men were injected into the army and the elite Republican Guard (RG). Indeed, following Iraq's military defeat by Iran at al-Faw in February 1986, the president decided to "tribalize" many elite units and the mid-level command of much of the army. He did so in the belief that tribal men were both braver in battle and, being purely Arab, unmixed with Iranian elements more reliable in a war against Iran. When he realized that his own tribe was far too small for such a massive assignment, he started recruiting young men from neighboring and friendly tribes, mostly Sunni Arab ones but also some from southern Shi'i tribes. He recruited tens of thousands of

young men from tribes like al-Hadithiyyun, al-Shaya'isha, al-Bu Khishman and al-Bu Bazun, all residing in and around Tikrit, but also from al-Jubbur, and other tribes who live mostly north and west of Baghdad. For these young men, coming from a very modest rural background and with relatively little education, a military career was an excellent avenue for upward social mobility(6) and there is little wonder that most of them remain loyal to the president and regime.

Even though there were a few cases when Republican Guard troops and even Special Republican Guard officers were involved in coup attempts, they were clearly the exception. Tribal loyalty is far from 100 percent, but when combined with meaningful social and economic benefits, it creates a strong bond. It is very likely that even this bond would melt away once these officers were certain or near certain of Saddam's impending demise, but fortunately for him, this has never happened.

In the army, as opposed to the RG, support for the president is far less staunch. Thus, the RG is placed between all army units and the capital city, and the Special Republican Guard (SRG) is stationed inside of Baghdad, and thus between the RG and the inner rings guarding the president. As long as the regime looks reasonably stable, the RG, the SRG, Special Security (SS), and the Palace Guard (or Presidential Guard, Himayat al-Ra'is) will remain essentially loyal to Saddam Husayn. If he is removed they have too much to lose: power and prestige, higher salaries than those of their army counterparts, and other privileges that increase in direct relation to a soldier's proximity to the president.

Surprisingly, the weakest link in this tribal military chain is the president's extended family. Family troubles started for Saddam Husayn in 1988, when his elder son, 'Udayy, murdered his beloved bodyguard and valet, Hanna Jojo. It is possible that this was the result of Saddam's 1986 decision to marry his mistress, Samira Shahbandar, when she was about to give birth to his baby. Apparently, Saddam's first wife, Sajidah, and

'Udayy were incensed. Hanna Jojo served as the messenger between the president and Samira, and this is believed by many to have been at least part of the reason for 'Udayy's hostility. As a result of the murder, 'Udayy was briefly imprisoned and then released and sent to Geneva to stay with his uncle, Barzan Ibrahim Hasan al-Tikriti. He later returned to Baghdad and was reinstated in all his duties. 'Udayy also developed a deep hatred for Saddam Husayn's second cousin once removed, General Husayn Kamil. Finally, 'Udayy also came into conflict with his uncle, Watban Ibrahim Hasan, the Minister of the Interior.

In August 1995, 'Udayy threatened to expose Husayn Kamil's corruption, and as a result, Kamil, with his brother Saddam Kamil, and their wives (Saddam's two daughters) and other family members defected to Jordan, dealing a tremendous blow to the regime's efforts to conceal its remaining non-conventional weapons. General Kamil was one of the most central figures in these efforts. In the same month 'Udayy also attempted to kill and seriously wounded his uncle Watban. The president again demoted his flamboyant son and the regime entered a deep crisis. A few months later, the Kamil brothers and their wives returned. They were forced to divorce the president's daughters and were later murdered along with their father and a few other family members. Their children-Saddam's grandchildren-were spared.(7)

This was the beginning of Saddam Husayn's recovery. Since then no meaningful family confrontations have been reported. The president also relied directly on his sons. 'Udayy was eventually reinstated as the czar of the Iraqi media and youth, and given back the command of a militia force, Fida'iyyi Saddam. His younger brother, Qusayy, has been put in charge of internal security. Today he is the chief supervisor of the RG, SRG, and SS. No army unit can move without his personal authorization. He is greatly aided by his older colleague, Saddam Husayn's chief bodyguard, 'Abd Ihmid Hmud, a Tikriti from Saddam Husayn's tribe.

There is little doubt that there is deep suspicion and resentment between 'Uday and Qusayy, but the system seems to be stable all the same. The president's half-brothers were effectively neutralized after they were ousted from all their state positions, including Barazan's job as Iraq's ambassador to the UN in Geneva (Barazan returned to Baghdad in 1999.) Even though there may be much resentment within Saddam's paternal cousins' family, the Majids, following the brutal murder of the Kamil branch, there has been no sign that any of them is trying to avenge their relatives.

In short, it would seem that at the outset of the new millennium, the Iraqi president managed to put his house back in order in a reasonable fashion and thus is free to dedicate his undivided attention to other affairs of state. The opposition abroad is divided and the United States and Britain give it only very limited help. The Shi'i opposition at home is capable of unpleasant pinpricks but unable to jeopardize the regime's stability. The Kurds are unwilling to engage once again in meaningful anti-regime activities. As a result, the main danger to leader and regime lies now in the unknown: a palace coup d'etat. All the indications are that this is where the Iraqi president is looking for trouble.

#### IRAQ'S REGIONAL POLICY

By 1999, Iraq's relations with a number of neighboring states showed clear signs of improvement. By far the most important change occurred in Iraqi-Syrian relations. Traditional mutual suspicions notwithstanding, once Iraq was allowed to resume selling its oil under UN supervision (see below), it finally possessed something that Syria wanted. With a portion of its oil revenues, Iraq has been purchasing Syrian agricultural products and other goods since 1996. For Syria, this became a very important source of hard currency.

At the same time, Syria reversed itself and began to call for an end to the international sanctions.(8) On the diplomatic level, Baghdad and Damascus agreed to exchange interest offices (though this has not

yet been implemented. Iraq even went so far as to announce that even if Syria signed a peace agreement with Israel, mutual relations would proceed, even though Baghdad would never follow suit.(9)

Trade centers were also opened in the two capitals. In June 1997, two border crossings were opened for the first time since 1982. State officials but also a few tourists have been allowed to cross in both directions, and businessmen are encouraged to conduct mutual visits. Advanced negotiations have been conducted on reopening the Iraqi-Syrian oil pipeline from Kirkuk and Haditha to the Mediterranean. The full capacity of the pipeline is 1.4 million barrels a day (bpd), but at present, it can deliver no more than 300,000 bpd.(10) All this is short of full diplomatic relations and truly open borders. But for Iraq, which is still besieged in many ways, it is a major breakthrough.

Relations with Egypt are the smoothest they have been since 1990. Egyptian businessmen and officials show up regularly in Baghdad, and Iraq buys various goods in Egypt as part of the Oil-for-Food program. Much like Damascus, Cairo is careful not to upgrade diplomatic relations completely,(11) and occasionally Egyptian spokesmen and newspapers are critical of the Iraqi regime.(12) But on occasion one can hear much more agreeable remarks coming from Cairo's government spokesmen or media. By the end of 1999, the demand to end the embargo was sounded both by Damascus and Cairo.(13) Maybe they can afford to make such a demand because they know that the United States and Britain are certain to prevent such a development, and in the process, both regimes can take up a cause that they believe is popular with many Arabs.

Jordan, whose economy has been heavily dependent on trade with Iraq, cannot afford to criticize Baghdad, even in the limited fashion that the Egyptian press does. Between 1995 and 1998, King Husayn was occasionally critical of the Iraqi regime's meddling in Jordanian domestic affairs and Iraq's general policy of confronting the UN. The King even offered support to the Kamil brothers upon

their defection. However, in the last year of his life, the Jordanian monarch refrained from confronting Iraq and settled for a practical co-existence.

His son, King Abdullah, has continued this policy, but has also introduced two innovations. First, he greatly improved Jordan's relations with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Upon his visit to Kuwait, he announced Jordan's support for Kuwait's efforts "to bring a positive end" to the issue of its war prisoners in Iraq.(14) The other change was to strengthen Jordan's ties with Damascus through personal and government-to-government contacts.

In January 2000, Jordan and Iraq signed a new trade agreement which, while far less beneficial to Jordan than expected, was still extremely important for Jordan's economic well-being. As in previous years, Iraq would provide for half of its oil consumption, at a value of \$300 million, free of charge. This was defined as Saddam Husayn's personal gift to the Jordanian people. The other half was to be sold to Jordan at a price lower than the international rate. Jordan demanded that it pay only \$14 per barrel. Eventually the price agreed upon, to Jordan's chagrin, was \$19 per barrel. This is still three or four dollars below the market price of this brand of oil, but for Jordan this is a high rate all the same. To compensate, the two countries decided to increase their trade volume from \$200 million in 1999 to \$300 million. The total value of the contracts signed between Jordanian companies and the Iraqi government since the beginning of the Oil-For-Food program in 1996 grew to \$842 million.(15)

Since 1991, Iraq's relations with Iran have undergone fairly extreme fluctuations. Even though, theoretically, the main bone of contention should have been the permanent border issue on the Shatt-al-Arab and a few small border zones further north (mainly Qasr Shirin and Sayf Sa'd), it seems that both Iraq and Iran are interested in far more pressing issues. The most painful one is that of prisoners of war. Even though on a few occasions the two countries have exchanged

them (16), Iraq claims that Iran still holds around 14,000 Iraqi prisoners.

It is not clear whether these people are alive or dead, and, if they are alive, whether or not they would like to go back to Iraq. Certainly some prisoners joined the Iraqi anti-government forces fighting alongside the Iranian troops under the command of Ayat Allah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim and the Da'wa Party.

A second problem poisoning relations is that of the 148 Iraqi civilian airplanes and jet fighters that crossed into Iran just before and during the Gulf War to escape the allied bombings. When Iraq demanded them back, Iran reported that it had sought the UN's advice and was told (very conveniently) that, as a result of the embargo, it was not allowed to return them. Naturally, Iraq was furious and denied that Iran had even approached the UN. Whatever the case, the airplanes are still in Iran.

Last but not least, Iraq is accusing Iran of providing support to Shi'i revolutionaries in the south. While the degree of Iranian support for such operations is unclear there is no doubt that armed revolutionaries are attacking Iraqi units in the south, mainly from makeshift bases in the marshes. Iraq also regards Iran as responsible for occasional bombing operations in Baghdad.(17)

Iran, for its part, points to official Iraqi support of the Mujahidin Khalq anti-Tehran movement, which has military bases on the border east of Baghdad. The last Mujahidin operation to date was a mortar attack on government buildings in downtown Tehran in February 2000.(18) At the same time, however, both Iranian and Iraqi spokesmen express the wish that bilateral relations be improved. In practice, too, trade relations are slowly being cemented, and Iranian pilgrims are allowed to visit Karbala.(19)

Iraqi barges smuggling illegal oil products to the United Arab Emirates through Iranian territorial waters probably could not do so without Iranian permission. This ambivalent pattern of bilateral relations, baffling as it is, shows real, if uneven, improvement. It would seem that in Iran the

absence of a central decisionmaking authority is making it impossible for the Iranian leadership to act decisively one way or another. Stopping all support for the Shi'i revolutionaries in the south is very difficult for ideological reasons, as well as because of the accumulated influence of some half a million Iraqi exiles in Iran. Recently the Iranian government took some steps to encourage these Iraqi expatriates to leave, but the results of this campaign are far from clear.(20)

Seen from the Iraqi side, giving up help to the Mujahidin Khalq is such a major concession that Iraq may want to settle all unresolved issues first. Iran, it seems, is satisfied with a weakened regime in Baghdad. It can do business with it and, at the same time, has no immediate reason to worry about its military machine. While providing limited support to the Shi'i opposition in the south, Tehran shows no interest in Iraq's disintegration, since such a development could plunge Iran into conflict with the Arab world. A weak Saddam prevents disintegration, guarantees a large degree of Iraqi isolation, and prevents pro-American forces from taking over in Baghdad.

While Iraq's relations with the UAE have improved since the mid-1990s,(21) those with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia remain extremely tense. The Saudis rejected all U.S. requests to use their territory as a base for launching bombing attacks against Iraq but did agree to allow their air space to be used by American forces. American AWACS were also allowed to take off from Saudi territory.(22) In addition, American jet fighters patrolling the southern No Fly Zone are using bases in Saudi Arabia. Iraq accuses Saudi Arabia of collaborating with U.S. military attacks, including the December 1998 air raids,(23) and even though Iraqi spokesmen occasionally express a readiness to reconcile both with Saudi Arabia and with Kuwait, vicious media attacks against the Saudi and Kuwaiti regimes are frequent.(24)

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait retaliate in kind, provoking further Iraqi diatribes.(25) It is quite clear that, while most Arab countries

(including those in North Africa and also Yemen) are gradually inching toward more normal relations with Iraq, Kuwait, victim of the 1990 occupation, and Saudi Arabia, which felt directly threatened, disagree. These two countries are both still adamant in demanding Iraqi compliance with the most important UN resolutions: total relinquishment of its WMDs and the return of the Kuwaiti prisoners and property.

Given Saudi Arabia and Kuwait's combined importance in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the organization has continued a tough line against Iraq. The Gulf states have been demanding repeatedly that Iraq must prove its peaceful intentions toward its neighbors and admit that its invasion of Kuwait was a violation of Arab and international legitimacy as well as the Arab League's charter. The Gulf states also distinguished between the Iraqi people and its rulers, saying they "sincerely shared the suffering of the fraternal country of Iraq the consequence of the policies and obstinacy of its government." The fact that they stressed the need to "safeguard Iraq's independence and territorial integrity" did not make the pill less bitter to the Iraqi regime.(26)

Although relations with Turkey have been characterized by extreme contradictions, they have been remarkably stable all the same. Since 1991, Turkey has allowed an Anglo-American (at first also the French) air force to use its Incerlik airbase to monitor the northern No Fly Zone, and occasionally even to attack Iraqi targets outside the No Fly Zone. Also, Turkish forces have invaded autonomous Iraqi Kurdish regions in mop-up operations against anti-Turkish Kurdish rebels. The Iraqi regime strongly protested both activities. Turkey also refused repeated Iraqi appeals to break the embargo by opening its pipelines to the free flow of Iraqi crude. Yet Turkey has allowed the flow of oil products in trucks through the common border and, like Iraq, greatly benefited from its cheap price. Those benefiting most were the Kurds of southeastern Turkey, which helped soothe ethnic discontent there. Since the beginning of the Oil-for-Food program

Turkey also obtains a fee for Iraqi oil sent through the Iraqi-Turkish pipelines going from Kirkuk to Dortyol. In exchange for oil, Turkey sells Iraq a variety of products.

Not surprisingly, the positions of Turkish politicians vis-à-vis the Iraqi regime are full of contradictions. Most of them no longer regard Saddam as dangerous. Because they fear the emergence of a Kurdish state, they prefer to see him back in the autonomous Kurdish zone, and because they need Iraqi business, they prefer that the embargo be lifted. However, the need for close military and political cooperation with the United States dictates caution, and thus most Turkish politicians prefer not to rock the boat. And because they do not fully trust the Anglo-American commitment that a fully-fledged Kurdish state will not emerge in northern Iraq, their best option is to carefully watch all parties concerned, and do what they can to prevent such an eventuality from materializing.(27)

#### IRAQ AND THE UN

With the end of Mikhail Gorbachev's rule, the Soviet Union--and later Russia--started to distance itself from American policies over Iraq. Even during the Gulf War, the USSR was careful not to send any troops to join the coalition. By the mid-1990s, France also started to differ with the Anglo-American position, and China never supported the military action against Iraq. In the second half of the 1990s, these three permanent Security Council members opposed any military action against Iraq, even when it meant abandoning the UN inspection system.

In terms of its rhetoric, France has always been closer to Anglo-American policies and far more committed than Russia and China to Iraq's disarmament, but in practice the differences between France and its two partners in the Security Council were small. While since 1998 the Russians supported the immediate lifting of the embargo,(28) claiming that Iraq has fulfilled all its obligations under UNSC Resolution 687 to disarm, France suggested an early end to the

embargo once the UNSCOM inspectors affirmed that Iraq had relinquished most of its Weapons of Mass Destruction.

The French formula held that the UN should not expect Iraq to comply with its resolutions to the letter. This was in marked contrast to the Anglo-American approach that Iraq had to satisfy 100 percent of UNSCOM's demands. Likewise, while the United States and Britain sought UN approval for military operations whenever Iraq seriously interrupted UNSCOM's military activities, Russia, France, and China always objected. This led to the Anglo-American decision to bomb Iraq in December 1998 without asking for UN Security Council approval.

Saddam Husayn's strategy of driving a wedge between the two camps in the Security Council proved highly successful. By promising French and Russian companies lucrative oil deals and other contracts in Iraq after the embargo was lifted, he managed to secure their support. The result was that, in effect, Iraq acquired a virtual veto right in the Security Council over important aspects of weapons inspections. Between December 1998 and December 1999 UNSCOM stayed out of Iraq, and there were no military operations, save almost daily small-scale confrontations over the No Fly Zones, which the Iraqi regime decided to challenge.

At the same time, however, there was no way Saddam's supporters in the Security Council could legally lift the embargo because such a decision could always be vetoed by the United States and Britain. To end this draw, the five permanent members eventually agreed to UNSC Resolution 1284, which established a new, somewhat less independent inspection body, the UN Monitoring Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC).(29) A few weeks later, after Iraq vetoed one candidate, Dr. Hans Blix, another Swedish diplomat who had been for many years the Chairman of the International Atomic Energy Agency, was nominated as the new body's director. Iraq rejected the new resolution because it demanded full cooperation with the new

inspection body for around one year before the embargo would be suspended and because suspension meant that it could be easily re-imposed (the suspension was to last for six months only, and to renew, there needed to be a consensus in the Security Council.)(30) No military measures were taken against Iraq for rejecting the resolution. This created a new stalemate in the Security Council.

#### CONCLUSION: WHAT NEXT?

What is Saddam Husayn's strategy for the next phase of his confrontation with the West? In a number of speeches, the Iraqi president has made very clear that he does not expect the embargo to be lifted all at once. Between 1991 and 1999, he managed to get rid of the weapons inspections and, except for four nights of aerial attacks in December 1999, was not punished for it. If he is successful in hiding his WMD production the United States will not bomb his installations in the future either. This is no small achievement.

At present the unresolved issue is that of the economic embargo. Regaining full control of his oil revenues is crucial for Saddam Husayn if he wants to rebuild his armed forces, resuscitate Iraq's economy and turn Iraq into a regional superpower once again. There is no easy way to reach that goal. Judging by numerous expositions of Iraqi spokesmen, Iraq's intention is to convince, first of all, the Arab and Islamic states (foremost among them, Jordan and Turkey), but also Russia, France, China and other powers, to break the embargo by conducting normal dealings with Iraq. When Russian and French oil companies refused to move in, the Iraqi authorities threatened to cancel the contracts that they had signed with them.(31)

To date, all Iraq's overtures to overturn the embargo unilaterally have failed, except for relatively small-scale oil smuggling through Iranian territorial waters to the UAE, into Syria, and into southeastern Turkey. The Iraqi hope is clearly that these breaches of the embargo will become a flood. To encourage its neighbors and some outside powers to

move along this trajectory, Iraq has been offering lucrative deals.

It seems that Russia is the first power ready to risk a confrontation with the United States over Iraqi oil smuggling: in February 2000 a few Russian vessels smuggling Iraqi heavy fuel were intercepted by the U.S. Navy, and the Russian foreign minister admonished the United States in bellicose tones, arguing that the oil was, in fact, loaded in Iran. The Iraqis poured oil on the diplomatic fire when they defined the incident as "sheer [US] piracy and [Russian] humiliation."(32)

What are Saddam Husayn's options and strategic choices? Theoretically, Saddam can stop the Oil-for-Food program, and thus create such suffering in Iraq that the U.S.-based humanitarian community will apply more pressure on Washington to lift the embargo. The dangers are, however, that the humanitarian community will blame him, and not the U.S. administration, for the suffering. More realistically, when people in Iraq feel that their daily sustenance is in immediate danger, they might get desperate and revolt despite the fear of fierce repression, and this time the United States may come through with strategic help. The regime has become the prisoner of its own policy in this respect: the Oil-for-Food program has become its opium. Alternatively, the Iraqi president may declare that, if the embargo is not lifted, he would use his remaining weapons of mass destruction against Israel, or Kuwait, or Saudi Arabia or all.

In practice, however such a scenario is not likely unless his political survival is clearly threatened. But this is far from being the case. In 2000, Iraq's international relations are developing in a promising fashion as more and more countries are keen to establish some presence in Baghdad, the United States and Britain are on the defensive in the UN, and the domestic American arena seems to be changing.

Since 1991, a very central component of Saddam Husayn's strategy has been exploiting the suffering of the Iraqi people to influence public opinion in the West to end the embargo. At first the American public

paid little attention to humanitarian arguments. Since the late 1990s, however, the Iraqi claim (though largely inflated)(33) that 5,000 children were dying every month as a result of the embargo started to change the public mood. Saddam Husayn, Tariq 'Aziz, and other Ba'thi luminaries cynically but successfully used the suffering of the children of Iraq, and mainly that of Iraq's Shi'i children whose parents revolted against the regime in 1991.

Humanitarian delegations reported regularly of the very real plight of the children in "Saddam's City" (a 2 million-person Shi'i quarter of Baghdad) and in Shi'i towns such as 'Amara and Karbala. That the Ba'th regime was responsible for the suffering did not detract from the tragedy. By late 1999, the "Oil-For-Food" program, introduced in 1996, greatly ameliorated the malnutrition problem: on average every person in Iraq was receiving by then the equivalent of 2200 Kilo-Calories for free. (Twenty-five-hundred KCal are usually regarded as sufficient for an adult.) The program also provided Iraq with very large quantities of medicines and medical equipment, but malnutrition has been slow to disappear, and distributing the medical supplies takes time. Generally speaking, the Iraqi public health system suffered so heavily during the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), the Gulf War and the mass revolts against the regime (1991), and the embargo, that to resuscitate it would require a few years.

In the meantime the Iraqi regime can convincingly show that in certain parts of the country the suffering is still great. To date, the humanitarian reports from Saddam's City and the Shi'i south are Saddam Husayn's most potent weapon against the embargo. The result is UNSC Resolution 1284 of December 7, 1999. The resolution retained financial control over most of Iraq's oil revenues, but relaxed the embargo in some important areas. Most significantly, Iraq was given permission to sell unlimited quantities of oil (before it was limited to selling at the value of around \$5.2 billion every 180 days.)

In February 2000, Iraq was producing only a little more than 2,000,000 barrels per day, and even though prices are high-more than \$25 per barrel-it could not take advantage of the new regulation. Still, by 2001, Iraq will very likely exceed its quota as set by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, and the permission to sell unlimited quantities will become extremely important.

The resolution also allowed Iraqi producers, for the first time, to sell their products to their government through the Oil-for Food program. This should have been allowed from the very outset, because it has a potential of greatly encouraging them to increase production since they would be receiving world market prices. Also, the resolution accepted the Iraqi request to substantially increase the amount of money allocated to the purchase of spare parts and technology for the oil sector. This will enable Iraq to overcome some very serious problems and to significantly expand its oil production. Finally, all contracts relating to food and medicines were to be automatically approved by the sanctions committee so as to expedite the processes.

None of the aforementioned concessions seriously jeopardizes the embargo, because its main tool, namely UN control of Iraq's oil revenues and supervision over Iraq's contracts, remains in place. However, humanitarian concerns among the American public opinion are growing substantially and becoming a major threat to the U.S. administration's strategy of hemming Saddam in by denying him control of Iraq's oil revenues.

In mid-February 2000, 70 U.S. members of Congress signed a petition addressed to President Clinton demanding an end to the embargo. At the same time, two leading UN officials concerned with the humanitarian operations in Iraq resigned in protest against the embargo.(34) One of them, Hans Von Sponeck, the UN humanitarian representative, demanded to "de-link" the military-political aspects of the embargo from the economic-humanitarian ones. Other humanitarian

activists simply demanded an end to the embargo. What the proponents of lifting the embargo demand is that Iraq be free to order and distribute any goods without any limits, but that border controls designed to prevent Saddam from importing weapons be substantially strengthened.

his approach is fully supported by the Iraqi government. Baghdad knows that the weapons' embargo will continue for a long time, and that it will not be lifted as long as the present regime is in power. At the same time, Iraq's leaders also seem to believe that once they have all of Iraq's oil revenues again under their complete control, they can buy weapons' technology, from machine tools and know-how to fissionable material, that will enable them to turn Iraq into a regional superpower. The strategy is not to rebuild a one-million man army but, rather, to develop weapons of mass destruction. According to UNSCOM reports, Iraq still has a seed stock of such weapons and much of the know-how necessary to develop them.

It is anybody's guess what Saddam Husayn's grand design might be once he is again in possession of such weapons. During the Gulf War, despite threats to the contrary, he carefully refrained from using such weapons against the Saudis, the Allied forces, or Israel. However, he also demonstrated an unacceptable degree of risk-taking. For a non-nuclear power to threaten Israel, whom Iraq believes to be a medium size nuclear power, is taking a huge risk.

Saddam Husayn is also prone to doomsday thinking. According to interviews with three senior UNSCOM officials, during the Gulf War he delegated authority to the commanders of his missile force that could have unleashed an unconventional war. The most dangerous order was to attack Israel with non-conventional missiles if communications between the missile force and Baghdad were severed and if the commanders believed that Baghdad was about to be conquered by the Allied forces. By giving his missile officers the instructions he did, the Iraqi president had to take into account the possibility of an Israeli nuclear

response. The logic behind it is that he preferred Baghdad be annihilated rather than conquered by the Allied forces.

All the existing evidence points to one direction, namely that the Iraqi president is a high-risk gambler not only when it comes to his conventional army, but, also in terms of his non-conventional arsenal. Judging by his speeches and actions in the 1989-1991 period, his first goal is to dictate oil prices to the Arab Gulf States and to neutralize the Iranian influence in the Gulf. His next goal is to become the generally recognized leader of the Arab world, mainly through assuming a confrontational posture towards Israel and making far-reaching promises to the Palestinians. (In April 1990, for example, he promised Arafat to liberate Jerusalem with Iraqi missiles and air power alone.)

In 1990-1991, Saddam Husayn also indicated that he saw himself as the potential leader of the whole Islamic world and, more dubiously, of the Third World. It is not clear how he hopes to achieve all of these ambitious goals even when he becomes a nuclear power and the second richest oil producer after Saudi Arabia. But there may be little doubt that he intends to try and achieve at least the inner core of this grand scheme.

*Amatzia Baram is head of the Jewish-Arab Center and the Gustav Von Heinemann Middle East Institute, Haifa University. His books include Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968-1989 and Building Toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival. He is co-editor of Iraq's Road to War.*

#### NOTES

1. For details see Amatzia Baram, "Qawmiyya and Wataniyya in Ba'thi Iraq: the Search for a New Balance," in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.19, No.2 (April 1983), pp.188-200.
2. See, for example, Michel 'Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba'th* (Beirut, Dar al-Tali'a) (1974), p.167; Saddam Husayn, "A View of Religion and Heritage," in his *On History, Heritage and Religion* (Baghdad, Translation and Foreign

Languages Publishing House, 1981), mainly pp. 24, 27-29. Also the internal party organ *Al-Thawra al-'Arabiyya*, (July 1980), pp. 13-18.

3. *Al-Jumhuriyya*, January 15, 1991.

4. *al-Thawra*, October 10, 1990; September 17, 1990.

5. Amatzia Baram, "Re-Inventing Nationalism in Ba'thi Iraq," in *Princeton Papers* (Fall 1998), Vol. 5, pp. 39-42.

6. For more details see Amatzia Baram, "Neo-Tribalism in Ba'thi Iraq," in *IJMES* 29, (1997), pp.1-31.

7. For details see Amatzia Baram, *Building Toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival* (Washington, D.C., The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998), pp. 7-36.

8. A declaration by a Syrian parliamentarian; *al-Malaff al-Iraqi* (London), No. 54, (June 1996), p.36. Reuters from Baghdad, May 16, 1996.

9. For example, an interview with Tariq 'Aziz, LBC Satellite TV in Arabic (Beirut), January 2, 2000, in FBIS-NES-DR, January 4, 2000, X-Lotus-From Domain. See also report of Iraqi officials leaving for Syria to open the interests section and information about mutual participation in international affairs in the two capitals and the opening of trade centers, *al-Ittihad* (Baghdad), December 28, 1999, p. 8, in FBIS-NES-DR JN2912131099 December 29, 1999.

10. US Energy Information Administration, *Iraq*, December 1999, p. 5, internet version [www.eia.doe.gov](http://www.eia.doe.gov).

11. See Egyptian denial of Iraqi reports that diplomatic relations will resume soon, *MENA in Arabic*, November 24, 1999, in FBIS-NES-DR NC2411190499, November 24, 1999.

12. See for example Mursi 'Ata Allah in *Al-Ahram*, November 18, 1999 as reported by *Mid-East Mirror* November 18, 1999 saying Saddam Husayn was first in imposing his own sanctions on his people, restricting their movements, speech and the way they think.

13. See for example Foreign Minister 'Amr Musa, "This [lifting sanctions] is not only an Egyptian demand but a general Arab demand." Very inaccurately he also said:

"there are no reservations, either from Saudi Arabia or Kuwait." Not surprisingly, Iraqi Foreign Minister Muhammad Sa'id al-Sahaf congratulated Musa on his position. See also Arab League Secretary General 'Ismat 'Abd al-Majid praising Saddam for his wish to engage in a "quiet and rational dialogue to address past mistakes([and] open a new page I Iraqi-Arab relations," Reuters, September 13, 1999

14. Reported by David Nissman in *Iraq Report*, Vol. 2, No. 34 (September 10, 1999).

15. *Al-Arab al-Yawm*, Amman, January 24, 2000, p. 14; Baghdad Iraq TV Network in English, Jan. 24, 2000, in FBIS-NES-DR, Jan. 25, 2000.

16. The last exchange occurred in April 1998, when Iran returned 5592 and Iraq 380 prisoners, see *New York Times*, April 7, 1998.

17. See for example an interview with Tariq 'Aziz, LBC Satellite TV in Arabic (Beirut), January 2, 2000, in FBIS-NES-DR, January 4, 2000, X-Lotus-FromDomain.

18. See warning to Iraq by the Chief of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, news agencies from Tehran, February 9, 2000, from [kurdishmedia@hotmail.com](mailto:kurdishmedia@hotmail.com).

19. See for example, President Khatami inviting Saddam Husayn for a visit and Iranian parliamentarians calling for improved relations. *Mid-East Mirror*, September 10, 1999. For an agreement to allow 3,000 Iranian pilgrims to visit Karbala every week, see IRNA in Persian, November 12, 1999, in FBIS-NES-DR LD1211192799, November 12, 1999. For three agreements on economic and trade cooperation, see *BBC*, Nov. 11, 1999, in Washington Kurdish Institute, November 15, 1999, internet version, [WKI@kurd.org](mailto:WKI@kurd.org).

20. See for example, *al-Ittihad* (Baghdad), September 7, 1999, p. 1, in FBIS-NES-DR MS0809131399, September 8, 1999; *Mid-East Mirror*, September 10, 1999.

21. See for example confirmed reports that Russian companies are selling companies in the UAE spares for T-72 tanks and Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters for which the UAE has no use. These spares find their way to a

desperate customer, Iraq Defense Week, January 3, 2000, p. 3. Also, see Shaykh Zayd Bin Bultan Aal Nahyan, President of the UAE, calling for the lifting of the embargo, Amatzia Baram, *Building Toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival* (Washington, D.C., The Washington Institute, 1998), p.144. And Shaykh Muhammad Bin Rashid Aal Maktum, the UAE Minister of Defense calling upon Kuwait to give Iraq territory to build a harbor, as quoted by Kuwait's al-Watan, in Iraq Report Vol. 3, No. 6, (February 11, 2000).

22. Interviews with American officials, Washington, D.C., December 1998.

23. See for example, Saddam Husayn's address to commanders Iraq Satellite Channel TV in Arabic, September 2, 1999, in FBIS-NES-DR, September 2, 1999.

24. See for example, Al-'Iraq, September 7, 1999 as reported by AFP, *ibid.* pointing out that Iraqis could "at a single stroke throw the al-Sabah monarchy into the waters of the Gulf." The Kuwaiti criticism of Iraq "betrays their hallucinations and aide the US-Zionist plot to divide the Arab and Islamic nation." An official of the Ministry of Culture and Information on Baghdad Radio on September 7, accusing Kuwait of "using all their wicked methods to destroy any form of Arab solidarity" and calling the Kuwaiti regime "the lowly ones," quoted by David Nissman Iraq Report, Vol. 2, No. 34 (September 10, 1999). See an attack against both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia that if they did not end their collaboration with the US they "will sustain further losses whether in terms of (relations with the Americans, the way the Arab and Muslim masses look at you, the things history will write about you", Sami Mahdi in al-Thawra, October 17, 1999, p. 1.

25. See for example King Fahd's speech in the GCC twentieth Round of Foreign Ministers Summit: "In our Gulf area the Iraqi regime still insists on its old stands and is still incapable of learning a single lesson of the painful past." The Iraqi side replied by accusing Fahd of adopting "the approach of treachery and forfeiting national and pan-Arab rights," as reported in Baghdad Iraqi TV

Network in Arabic, November 29, 1999, in FBIS-NES-DR JN2911205099, November 29, 1999.

26. AFP, from Cairo, September 13, 1999

27. For more details see Baram, *Building Toward Crisis*, pp.109-122.

28. For example, the Russian Ambassador to Baghdad, Alexander Chevin, to al-Jumhuriyya, November 27, 1999, p.3.

29. UNSC S/RES/1284 (1999), adopted by the SC at its 4084 meeting, December 17, 1999, internet version.

30. See for example Tariq 'Aziz, interview to Baghdad Radio of Iraq Network, February 2, 2000, in FBIS-NES-DR JN0202201800, February 2, 2000. Taha Yasin Ramadan, arguing that no inspection at all would be tolerated any more because it serves as cover for espionage, Baghdad Republic of Iraq Radio, February 10, 2000, in FBIS-NES-DR, February 10, 2000; but Deputy Foreign Minister Nizar Hamdun saying Iraq might agree if major changes are introduced into the Resolution, Iraq Report, (Vol. 3, No. 6), February 11, 2000.

31. For overtures to Syria, Jordan, and Turkey to bust the embargo see Baram, *Building Toward Crisis*, pp.87-96, 109-136.

32. For Russian ships involved see Steven Lee Myers, *New York Times*, February 1, 2000. For the foreign minister's demand that a Russian ship be immediately released and Iraqi meddling Segodnya (Moscow), Feb.4, 00, in FBIS-NES-DR MS0402140900, Feb.4, 2000.

33. For a solid statistical analysis of child mortality in Iraq see Richard Garfield, *Morbidity and Mortality among Iraqi Children From 1990 to 1998: Assessing the Impact of Economic Sanctions* (Goshen, Indiana, Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame and the Fourth Freedom Forum, March 1999).

34. Ha-Aretz (Tel Aviv), February 17, 2000. For more details see "The Political Scene" in MEES Website ([www.mees.com](http://www.mees.com)), (Vol. 43, No. 8), February 21, 2000.