

# Building toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival

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## Brief Analysis

On July 29, 1998, Amatzia Baram, an associate professor in the Department of Modern History of the Middle East at Haifa University and the recipient of The Washington Institute's 1998 Ira Weiner Fellowship, addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum to discuss the findings of his new book, **Building toward Crisis: Saddam Husayn's Strategy for Survival.** ([templateC04.php?CID=4](#)) The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

### The Transformation since 1995

Saddam Husayn and Iraq have undergone a remarkable transformation since 1995, when Saddam was fighting for his very survival. Today, Saddam seems firmly in control in Iraq. The major milestones in this transformation are:

- 1995/96: the erosion of domestic support created the most difficult year in Saddam's rule since the Ba'th party's ascension to power in Iraq in 1968. The only other comparable period was the Kurdish and Shi'i uprising in March 1991, when Saddam's very survival was at stake.
- August-September 1996: by moving on Irbil in the Kurdish North, Saddam was able to bolster his position domestically and in the Arab world at large.
- September-November 1997: Saddam improved his position in the international political arena -- not so much with his immediate neighbors but with more distant Arab countries (e.g. Egypt) and with France, Russia, and China.
- 1997/98: Saddam improved his standing with the international humanitarian community. Iraqi propaganda has proven very successful in influencing Western and Arab media coverage of the impact of sanctions on Iraq.

### The Pillars of Saddam's Regime

Saddam Husayn's power rests on four main elements of Iraqi society:

- The Family : In 1995, Saddam was befallen by tremendous calamities. He sacked two of his half-brothers as well as a cousin from top political and military positions, including that of Minister of Defense and Chief of General Security. In addition, he ordered the arrest of his nephew on charges of corruption. Saddam's family problems culminated in an assassination attempt against his eldest son 'Udayy and the defection of Saddam's son-in-law, Husayn Kamil, to Jordan in August 1995.
- The Tribes and Tribal Federations: Although Saddam has not lost support among the tribes, there are signs of fraying solidarity among a number of afkhadh (subtribal units), most notably among the Dulaym, the Jubbur, the 'Ubayd, and even his own Tikriti tribe. As a result, members of these afkhadh have largely been removed from

the most sensitive positions of authority and are closely monitored by Saddam's inner circle.

As for al-qabila (tribal federations), these were formed by Saddam and the Ba'th party to become key pillars of the regime. Many members of these tribal federations have assumed high military and political positions, yet most are kept under strict control.

- **The Party:** Following the Gulf War, Saddam revived the Ba'th party in order to compensate for the weaknesses demonstrated by his family and the tribes. Ba'th party members were coopted to positions of responsibility, as the party gradually reverted to an instrument of control over Iraqi society. However, as Saddam has realized, the party could not completely take over the function of the family or the tribes.
- **The Military and Security Apparatuses:** In contrast to the party, the military had been demoralized by soldiers' low standards of living and the humiliating reminders of the army's weakness, including the no-fly and no-drive zones. This development has affected all levels of the Iraqi army, including the Republican Guard, and has led to defections and attempted coups d'état. Only after a successful military operation in Irbil (in Iraqi Kurdistan) in August-September 1996 was Saddam able to restore the morale of the Republican Guard.

As far as his personal security is concerned, Saddam relies on the himaya (Palace Guard) and the notorious al-Amn al-Khass (Special Security Organization, or SSO), the latter also being responsible for Iraq's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. The SSO proved very helpful in intimidating Saddam's opponents, both real and perceived, and has not shown any significant signs of dissent as of yet.

#### The International Factor

Saddam's survivability is not only a function of continuous support from the above-mentioned groups within Iraq. Not less important, he has benefited from the disintegration of the Gulf War coalition and from the ever-growing number of states calling for a quick lifting of UN sanctions against Iraq.

> Saddam Husayn has managed to turn recent international crises into foreign policy successes, thus strengthening his grip on power within Iraq. A growing number of states in the Middle East seem to favor a rehabilitation of Iraq: there are signs of a guarded rapprochement towards Syria and a slight improvement of relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, far-off countries such as France, China, and Russia are backing Iraq by calling for a quick end to the UN sanctions, thus creating an ironical situation in which the US seems to be more isolated than Iraq. As a result, Saddam has managed to win important concessions on a range of issues related to weapons inspections.

#### What Would Weaken Saddam

The international crises initiated by Baghdad in 1997/98 have strengthened Saddam's domestic power base, and he therefore considers them a great success. It is likely that he will continue to pursue this course as long as he believes it to be helpful. The most damaging outcome of any crisis for Saddam would be one that proved him a failure as a leader. For that reason, Saddam has to continuously demonstrate to his supporters that the UN sanctions will soon come to an end, which in turn leads to a dependence of Iraq on ongoing French and Russian support. A breach with France and Russia combined with a US air campaign could weaken his power substantially.

> At least four major developments could each lead his power base to such a conclusion:

- A sustained military campaign aimed at destroying his military power.
- Failure to convince his power base that the sanctions against Iraq will soon be lifted.

- Loss of Iraq's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.
- Erosion of his domestic propaganda campaign.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Assaf Moghadam. ❖

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