

A Review of Saddam's Iraq:

Three Years after the Gulf War

Mar 17, 1994



Brief Analysis

Tariq Aziz's efforts this week to persuade the UN to quicken the pace of weapons-monitoring procedures come amid a reassessment of Iraqi strategy in response to the international sanctions regime. In the three years since the end of the Gulf War, Iraq has managed to rebuild most of its damaged infrastructure, armed forces, and internal security apparatus. Despite the international embargo that prevents Iraq from selling oil in great quantities, there is no mass starvation. And the ruling elite has undergone surprisingly few changes over the last three years: the old guard are almost all still there, playing their usual game of musical chairs. The result is a seemingly stable system. Indeed, between May 1991 and February 1994 there were no reliable reports of mass riots or nearly successful coups d'état.

Behind the scenes, however, there are ominous developments that the regime is trying furiously to contain -- developments that the Iraqi leadership seems to recognize could cause the disintegration of Ba'ath rule or the Iraqi state itself. Signs of these developments have begun to emerge, as the regime has recently issued a series of threats against the West and the United States if by late March Baghdad is not shown the light at the end of the sanctions tunnel.

Back in Business

The degree of restoration is impressive. All 133 bridges destroyed by Allied forces during the war have either been repaired or replaced. The telephone and electric power systems have also been restored to an extent sufficient to meet current needs (Iraq requires far less electricity than before the war, since much of its heavy industry remains idle). Water purification systems are back on line, although the sewage system is still malfunctioning.

To prevent mass starvation, Saddam introduced a system of food rationing that has functioned reasonably well. Some 40,000 shopkeepers distribute rations practically free of charge that provide about 60 percent of an Iraqi family's daily calories; the remainder is available on the free market. According to official sources, this rationing system costs the government \$90 million in hard currency every month.

Iraq's oil refining capacity has been revived and adequately supplies domestic consumption, in addition to providing at least 25,000 barrels per day of oil products for export to Jordan and other countries. Should the oil embargo be lifted, the rest of Iraq's oil exporting facilities could be quickly repaired, allowing for the immediate export of roughly a million barrels per day, and an increase shortly thereafter to about 3 million barrels per day.

In addition, the small southern port of Umm Qasr has been re-opened, with the first ship anchoring there last November amid great public fanfare. And the government has embarked on a number of large-scale projects, the most spectacular of which is "Saddam's River," a 565-kilometer canal from Baghdad to Basra that includes eighty-four new bridges and a large tunnel under the Euphrates. Designed for irrigation and drainage, one of the main purposes of the project is to drain the eastern marshes and thus enable the Iraqi army to evict and destroy the local marsh Arabs.

Securing the Future

The Iraqi army was also reconstructed, although at less than half its previous size. The Republican Guard comprises six of the army's thirty divisions. Altogether there are about 400,000 people in uniform with an estimated 3,000 tanks, 250-350 combat airplanes, and 300-400 military helicopters (Iraq lost few pilots in the war, since most of its air force avoided combat). The army is conducting regular large-scale training maneuvers, mainly to boost morale, and functions primarily to prevent renewed revolt in the south and harass and threaten the Kurds.

The internal security forces suffered a devastating blow in the south during the Shi'a uprising of March 1991, but are now sufficiently rebuilt to keep the area (except for the marshes) safely under foot.

In Baghdad, Saddam is surrounded by an internal ring of several thousand bodyguards (al-Himaya) organized into three units. One is commanded by his son Qusay, and the others by his cousins Arshad Yasin and Rukan Razuqi; all are overseen by his formidable personal secretary Abd al-Hamid Mahmud. Around these forces is a division of the Special Republican Guard, and at least one more division of the Republican Guard is deployed outside Baghdad to secure the entrances to the city.

Still Tight at the Top

Saddam's inner circle remains essentially unchanged since the war's end, except for the departure of Hussein Kamil, ostensibly due to illness. Despite a few purges (to be discussed in Part II), dissent has not reached the very top of the Ba'ath political leadership. Changes in the three highest institutions -- the Revolutionary Command Council, the Regional Leadership of the Ba'ath party, and the government -- are more frequent than ever, but they involve only one or two cases of trial and disappearance. The rest merely lose their positions and resurface elsewhere within the state bureaucracy.

While there is a potentially dangerous decline in the prestige and influence of the party, with the void being filled by retired army officers, so far there is no clear evidence that the army, or elements of it, has made any concerted effort to take power. And although Saddam's family shows some early cracks of disunity, it continues to function as one unit. At the same time, however, there are signs of unrest in the army and among the Tikriti social elite. On the wider popular level, the regime concedes the existence of serious social and economic problems, and there are clear indications that it takes these difficulties very seriously.

Conclusions

Saddam's success in surviving in the face of the most stringent sanctions regime in history is undeniable. It would be an error, however, to conclude that sanctions have failed and should be lifted in favor of a new approach that attempts to reintegrate Iraq into the world community. As Part II of this series discusses, a steady stream of indicators in the past eighteen months suggest that Saddam's resilience may have peaked, and that he and his regime are now battling the clock.

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