

Complicity in Iraq:

How Deep?

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Brief Analysis

As war with Iraq looms closer, postwar questions are receiving increasing attention. Senior defense officials have been addressing such issues frequently, and the White House held a press briefing yesterday on "Humanitarian Reconstruction" in Iraq. One of these issues concerns individuals who have been complicit in the crimes of Saddam Husayn's regime. According to the Washington Post, the United States intends to conduct a "de-Baathification" program in Iraq similar in some ways to the "de-Nazification" program conducted in Germany in the wake of World War II. Although the details of this program are still to be worked out, the Post indicated that complicity in "human rights and weapons abuses" would be key criteria in determining which Iraqi officials would be permitted to keep their jobs.

The Scope of Complicity

From the start, one must recognize that complicity in the crimes of the regime is not limited to senior officials, but reaches deep into the extended apparatus of the government. Just how deep or widespread no one knows for sure; the United States and its allies will discover the scope of this wrongdoing only after the regime has been toppled and they have created the mechanisms for identifying and processing those suspected of complicity. Yet, it is possible to describe the landscape of complicity and develop a general sense of the extent of the problem; that is, where allied forces might look for the regime's accomplices.

In Iraq, active participation in regime-related activities is seen as a foundational element of loyalty to the country's rulers. The omnipresent nature of the regime, its penetration into all aspects of Iraqi society, is partly responsible for this mindset. The "regime" is not limited to a narrow ruling elite. Senior officials may determine policy in Iraq, but numerous individuals of lesser status in the security, military, party, government, and tribal ranks implement it. Those who have taken active roles are not merely compliant, they are complicit. After some thirty-five years of Ba'ath rule and twenty-four years under Saddam, many Iraqis are highly compromised. They have implemented the intentions and plans of the regime and have been rewarded for it.

Security and Military Complicity

According to the November 2002 British dossier on human rights violations in Iraq, "Several [Revolutionary

Command Council (RCC)] decrees give the security agencies full powers to suppress dissent with impunity." Indeed, below the top level of authority in Iraq, numerous internal security and intelligence organizations constitute the most important network of responsibility. The Special Security, General Security, General Intelligence, Military Intelligence, and Military Security services all have the same primary missions: protecting the regime and suppressing internal dissent. These organizations conduct surveillance, assassinate the regime's opponents, break up opposition groups, thwart coups, and run an extensive prison system wherein captives are interrogated and tortured. Such activities require the participation of many Iraqis; even those at the lowest levels of society often play a role (e.g., as informers).

Military involvement in suppression of unrest or dissent is another form of complicity in the regime's abuses. This includes regular army units that participated in activities such as the forced resettlement of Kurdish villagers and the various operations against the Shi'is in southern Iraq. For example, according to the UN Special Rapporteur's October 14, 1999, report on human rights in Iraq: "in late March 1999, Armoured Division Six [a regular army unit] carried out operations surrounding and bombarding a number of residential areas of some of the tribes living in the Governorate of Basra." And from the Rapporteur's 1994 report: "Following bombardments, forces composed of regular army, Republican Guard and Special Forces would advance with their armoured vehicles, including tanks and heavy artillery, and surround the villages of the area. After the capture of the region, the troops would enter the villages, carry out indiscriminate arrests and conduct house-to-house searches before burning the reeds and destroying the houses." Some of these units may have just been "following orders," but to the extent that they did, they are responsible for what happened during these operations.

Civilian Complicity

Membership in the Ba'ath Party has allowed Iraqis who are not members of military or security organizations to become involved in human rights violations. As indicated in the October 1999 UN report, party members participate in the violent suppression of unrest and dissent, and the party militia is one of the regime's primary policing mechanisms. According to the November 2002 British dossier, "An RCC decree of 21 December 1992 guarantees immunity for Ba'ath party members who cause damage to property, bodily harm and even death when pursuing enemies of the regime."

The government bureaucracy itself has participated in the regime's abuses. For example, the October 1999 UN report noted the collusion between senior regime figures, government bureaucrats, and Ba'ath party officials: "executions were reportedly carried out by members of the security forces under the direct supervision of the highest State authorities, namely Ali Hassan Al-Majid, then Governor of the southern region and a cousin of President Saddam Hussein, Ahmed Ibrahim Hamash, Governor of Basra, and Abdul Baqi Al-Saadoon, a prominent member of the Ba'ath Party."

Tribal elements form another part of the government's apparatus of control. Tribes loyal to the regime help to defend it and are rewarded with weapons and other benefits. To the extent that they have participated in security operations, they are also complicit in the regime's crimes.

The Iraqi scientific and industrial community must share responsibility as well. Chemical weapons were employed extensively against Iraqi Kurds during the 1987–1988 "Anfal" campaign. Moreover, the November 2002 British dossier stated that in 1998, Iraq obstructed UN inspectors attempting to investigate claims that Iraqi prisoners were used for experimentation with biological weapons. Iraqi scientists who have contributed to the development of chemical or biological weapons, along with the members of the industrial establishments that have produced them, share some measure of guilt for the regime's use of these weapons against Iraqi civilians and prisoners.

Conclusion

All of these factors suggest that regime change in Iraq will be more than a matter of removing the top layer of Iraqi officials. From the start, the U.S.-led coalition will need Iraqi help in administering the country, while effective military and security forces will be crucial to the long-term process of handing the reins of governance to the Iraqis. Yet, finding untainted (or even merely compliant) individuals to assume these roles could prove a difficult, error-prone, and protracted task. Clearly, then, the United States and its allies must commence or accelerate preparations for the extensive vetting of Iraqi military commanders and a broad swath of officials connected to the regime. Many of those complicit in the regime's crimes will likely attempt to flee the country or blend into the population during the post-Saddam chaos, and the coalition must prevent their escape. The absorption of tainted Iraqis into the interim government would be a major mistake as well. The coalition should build a detailed knowledge base on Iraqi security, military, Ba'ath, and tribal elements, documenting their history of involvement in human rights abuses. Indeed, a systematic effort by allied intelligence services should be in motion now, and capturing people and records of interest should be regarded as an important part of military operations.

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