

Free Us!

Dec 2, 2001



Articles & Testimony

Despite reports that Saddam Hussein has rebuilt his army under sanctions, military morale is perilously low in Iraq. If the United States were to throw its weight behind the Iraqi opposition, Saddam Hussein's police state would likely collapse faster than did the Taliban.

I lived in Iraq for nine months last year while working as a visiting professor at universities in the no-fly zone. I thus did not have to submit to Iraqi government escorts or minders.

The area is an integral part of Iraq, even though the local population threw off Saddam's rule a decade ago. But Iraqis in the safe haven have freedom of speech.

I was able to interview Iraqis who live there, and those visiting from cities under Saddam's control.

Rather than blame the United States for sanctions, these Iraqis criticized Washington for not doing more to help Iraqis free themselves from Saddam. "Everyone knows that the United States could get rid of Saddam if it wanted to," one doctor told me. "The question we all ask is why they don't make their move."

Iraqis with husbands and sons in uniform and even former soldiers said that morale is low and the United States could easily collapse the Iraqi military. "Do you really think my son wants to be in uniform? Or anyone in his unit? He hears about life outside of Iraq. That's what he wants to live, not what he wants to fight. But if he says anything, they kill him," a man visiting from Baghdad told me over whiskey at a local restaurant.

Last December, Iraqi troops invaded the safe haven and surrounded Baadre. I went to the town soon after the local militia repulsed the attack. Residents reported that when U.S. warplanes flew low over Iraqi lines, 138 of Saddam's troops threw down their weapons and surrendered without a shot being fired. No Iraqi wants to die for Saddam.

Baadre is not an exception. Twice since last spring, Iraqi troops have invaded the safe-haven near the town of Kifri. Both times, local militias defeated the demoralized Iraqi army.

Once, I snuck into government territory. The Iraqi frontline soldiers were slovenly and undisciplined. Local opposition commanders told me they could be in Baghdad within a week, if only America would provide air support.

On Feb. 16, 2001, the U.S. bombed several Iraqi military targets just outside Baghdad. I was working out in the Dahuk University gym -- just three miles from the frontline -- when I heard the news. A colleague excitedly told me, "The new Bush knows how to deal with Saddam."

Over the next few days, I heard similar Iraqi endorsements of the U.S. military strike. Iraqis were later astounded when the State Department second-guessed the wisdom of the airstrikes. Indeed, the greatest surprise of my time in Iraq was that Iraqis did not fault Washington for the sanctions (they blame Saddam), but rather they blamed America for not matching her rhetoric with military action.

Iraqis have suffered under Saddam for more than two decades. They view his legacy with disdain. Saddam has started two wars, leading to more than a million deaths. In a 1988 orgy of violence, he killed 182,000 civilians.

He used chemical weapons against his own citizens, killing 5,000 in the town of Halabja alone. (Several of my students were survivors of this attack, and still suffer medical complications). Rather than build new hospitals, Saddam has spent \$2 billion on new presidential palaces since 1991.

Iraqi morale is low. Iraqi troops are waiting for a reason to defect. The choice is now solely President Bush's: Will he give Iraqis reason to celebrate in the streets as he did the Afghans, or will he continue Iraqi suffering by allowing Saddam to remain in power, sponsoring terrorist groups and working to develop nuclear weapons? ❖

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