The Iraqi People Want to Know When Mr. Bush Will Get Tough

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Articles & Testimony

On May 18, the day after Great Britain proposed lifting United Nations sanctions on all civilian goods in Iraq, a taciturn Iraqi farmer asked me: "Why does the West talk about Saddam's war crimes on one day, but reward him the next?"

Such is the perception of ordinary Iraqis, who understand Saddam, and are incredulous at how the Western press and public so readily accepts Saddam's propaganda. Saddam Hussein wants the West to believe that sanctions are to blame for suffering in Iraq. He spares no effort to control the spin from Iraq: his party controls all the television stations and newspapers. Journalists visiting Iraq accept Iraqi government escorts; even when reporters escape from their minders, most Iraqis hesitate to speak critically, since they know others are watching.

The Iraqi government bans those who report critically. Even the United Nations is not immune. The Baghdad government controls visas for UN officials to enter Iraq. For many UN workers from poor countries, a UN Iraq position is the best job they will ever have. But they must regularly renew their visas. If they do anything to displease Baghdad, they simply lose their UN jobs. At present, the Iraqi government is refusing more than 280 UN workers visas to do their jobs. High level UN officials live in isolated compounds or neighbourhoods, seeing other UN employees and political officials, but seldom ordinary people.

I was not subject to Saddam's restrictions. I entered Iraq illegally, without a visa. I spent nine months in the northern portion of the country, an area still under sanctions but free from Saddam's control for a decade. I taught more than 500 students at the region's three universities. I walked and drove without guards or drivers, doing my own shopping, and talking both with Iraqis from the safe haven and the portion of the country under Saddam's control. Free to speak while in the north, the ordinary Iraqis had startling things to say.

I shared a house in Sulaymaniyah with a visiting professor from Baghdad. He talked about how the Iraqi government organised anti-sanctions demonstrations. The dean of his college would order him to lead his students to the site of a protest; the names of any who failed to attend had to be given to security agents. If any demonstrator got airtime with foreign television, he would receive a monetary bonus. Following the protest, the Iraqi government would bus the poor to a reception hall for a fancy dinner. The professor was incredulous that people would assume that such protests had anything to do with popular sentiment.

Iraqis, likewise, could not believe that London and Washington did not understand the message of Saddam's 13-hour military parade on December 31.

"Don't you see that he's just thumbing his nose at the West?" one university friend asked. Saddam Hussein started two previous wars, and murdered 182,000 civilians (many with chemical weapons) in a 1988 orgy of violence and ethnic cleansing. Most Iraqis think Saddam will do it again if given the chance - especially once he develops a nuclear deterrent.

So what do Iraqis want? I was at a gym in Dahuk, Iraq, on February 16 when word came of the US bombing of Iraqi

radar installations near Baghdad. People were excited. "Finally, the US shows it is serious," a businessman remarked as we sweated in the sauna. The euphoria did not last though. When I left Iraq, the mood was dark. Not only were American and British officials publicly discussing weakening the no-fly zones in response to Saddam's pressure, but they were also talking of easing sanctions.

Proponents of smart sanctions mean well, but then again so did Neville Chamberlain. They argue that by loosening controls on civilian goods, the West can ease the suffering of the Iraqi people still living under Saddam. While good in theory, sanctions revisions do nothing to force Saddam to actually feed his people. Many Iraqis in the north told of Iraqi government officials confiscating their UN ration cards. Unless the West addresses the root cause of the problem - Saddam - suffering in Iraq will continue.

The decline in infant mortality, the increase in fertility, and the general improvement in health in northern Iraq despite sanctions, show that sanctions are not the problem. It is hard for people to starve when, every month, the oil-for-food programme gives each individual nine kilograms of flour, three kilograms of rice, as well as sugar, tea, oil, milk, cheese, salt and meat and vegetable protein. Fruit, meat and vegetables are plentiful in the markets. While there are humanitarian tragedies in parts of the south, sanctions have little to do with it.

When Slobodan Milosevic went about the ethnic cleansing of Muslims, the West did not respond by giving him money or business contracts. It is curious that they do in Iraq.

Many Iraqis travel frequently to Baghdad to visit friends and family and hear the latest news. When they return, they speak with unanimity: Iraqis want Saddam ousted. People remember the pre-Saddam years when Iraq was a wealthy, cosmopolitan country, before Saddam's two disastrous wars and massive spending on palaces. They know that the morale of Saddam's army is very low. When Saddam's troops last entered the safe haven last December, 138 elite Iraqi troops threw down their weapons and surrendered the instant an American or British war plane flew low over Iraqi lines. No Iraqi wants to die for Saddam; they just want an opportunity to escape his regime.

Iraqis who have lived under Saddam's rule and have fought in his forces say that a change of regime can only happen from inside Iraq. While some in Washington may hope for a coup, it will not happen. In order for Iraqi divisions to move, the military and political commissars and intelligence apparatus must all sign them off. Even then, ammunition has to travel separately. The only promising option that will avert an humanitarian crisis is insurgency. Soldiers and people on the street say the only thing Saddam understands is force - he interprets negotiation as both weakness and an encouragement to threaten his neighbours.

Iraqis will support any group that has Washington and London's unequivocal backing, but they do not want a paper tiger. Washington and London could start by creating an atmosphere where internal opposition could develop. No-fly zones should expand to become no-drive zones, so that Saddam cannot use tanks against his own people. A muddle-through approach may be popular in the Foreign Office and the State Department, but it does not amount to leadership, nor does it solve the problem, nor does it make Saddam less of a threat to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Iran or the Iraqi people.

The Bush and Blair administrations must end the debate and take action. If America and Britain are serious, Saddam Hussein could be sharing a prison cell with Slobodan Milosevic tomorrow. ❖

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