Sulaymaniyah Dispatch

Jun 18, 2001

Articles & Testimony

The Azad pharmacy in Sulaymaniyah is stocked with medicines. So is the Shara pharmacy next door. In the cool early evening hours, the street bustles with shoppers, some of whom drift inside. They hand over prescriptions, pay the equivalent of a few cents, and walk out with antibiotics for their wives or medicine for their children. Down the street, shops sell watermelons, cheese, vegetables, and meat. Even the liquor stores have large inventories. Mazdas and Mercedeses are becoming more common on the newly paved roads; in the wealthier areas, it is not uncommon to see BMWs. Sony PlayStation has become the latest craze, even among housewives. None of which would be particularly noteworthy, except that Sulaymaniyah is in Iraq.

For years Saddam Hussein has loudly complained that U.N. prohibitions on the sale of Iraqi oil, imposed when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, are starving his people. To prove his point, Saddam has taken foreign reporters and diplomats on tours throughout greater Iraq, where the citizenry does indeed seem to be suffering mass deprivation. And his public relations campaign has borne fruit, eroding public support for sanctions in Europe and in the United States and contributing to the Bush administration's recent proposal to radically scale them back.

But Sulaymaniyah, a city in northern Iraq with approximately 500,000 inhabitants, tells a different story. Indeed, across a crescent-shaped slice of northern Iraq, the picture is the same: The shops are stocked, and the people are eating. Northern Iraq lives under exactly the same international sanctions as the rest of the country. The difference here is that local Kurdish authorities, in conjunction with the United Nations, spend the money they get from the sale of oil. Everywhere else in Iraq, Saddam does. And when local authorities are determined to get food and medicine to their people--instead of, say, reselling these supplies to finance military spending and palace construction--the current sanctions regime works just fine. Or, to put it more bluntly, the United Nations isn't starving Saddam's people. Saddam is.

You can see this starkly in a place like Dohuk, about 300 miles northwest of Sulaymaniyah, where a two-story supermarket has arisen from the ashes of an Iraqi Revolutionary Guards base. Shoppers enjoy hamburgers and ice cream in the cafe; elsewhere they buy frozen meat and choose among a wide variety of canned goods from Iran, Turkey, and Europe. Upstairs, shoppers can try on locally made, and even Italian designer, shoes and clothes. At checkout, cashiers swipe each item with infrared scanners.

Northern Iraq has been independent of Saddam (and guarded by U.S. and British patrols) since the Kurdish uprising that followed the Gulf war in 1991. And, under the sanctions regime in place ever since, the north receives 13 percent of Baghdad's oil income and can use the money to finance U.N.-approved projects. Those projects are wide-ranging, and they have transformed northern Iraq. Where Saddam's Baath Party headquarters and political prison were once located, the University of Dohuk now sits. Other cities are building schools, sewage systems, and hospitals. The din of generators is a constant distraction, but it's also a sign of the Kurds' effective administration: Local authorities have built the generators because Baghdad has reneged on its oft-repeated promises to provide the north with adequate electricity. (Indeed, Saddam has gone so far as to deny visas to the U.N. contractors and specialists who are supposed to be building new power plants in the north.)

Even rural areas share in the bounty. New schools and medical clinics grace small villages along rebuilt roads. Westerners may remember the mountainous Halabja region from photographs taken in 1988, during Saddam's infamous Anfal campaign, when the Iraqi regime gassed hundreds of Kurds there. Now Kurdish authorities are clearing the region of mines and introducing agricultural and reforesting programs--programs financed by oil-for-food money. But the most striking proof that the sanctions themselves don't make Iraqis suffer lies in northern Iraq's public health statistics: Infant mortality in the region is actually lower than it was before the United Nations imposed sanctions in 1990. "When I was in primary school, we had to scrounge for food," one university student joked. "Now my mother complains if she can't find truffles in the market."

It could be this way in southern Iraq, too. But incredibly, even as Saddam's regime milks its people's suffering for international sympathy, it sells food abroad that is earmarked for Iraqi citizens. According to the U.S. State Department, in October 1999 Allied patrols in the Persian Gulf stopped three ships that were carrying food out of Iraq. Near the Iranian border, I watched smugglers load sacks of rice and grain (and whiskey) for export. When you throw in the fact that per capita income in Iraq (approximately $1,000) remains higher than in Syria ($900) and Yemen ($270), where few people go hungry, it becomes clear that there's no reason why Iraqis should be suffering--particularly when Saddam's regime has found $2 billion to build palaces, and even an amusement park for party officials, since the sanctions began. Of course, you won't see these things on the official tour: Unlike the Kurds, who allowed me to travel freely on my own, Saddam's regime insists on carefully managing visits.

This is not to say the sanctions don't affect citizens in the north at all. Although people have food, unemployment is high, and the economy remains weak. Whereas the Iraqi dinar was once worth three dollars, one dollar now buys 18 Iraqi dinars in the streets of northern Iraq. Still, this is far better than in the south, where undisciplined financial practices (such as printing new currency whenever Saddam needs to pay workers) have driven the dinar down to one-hundredth of its value in the north. In fact, in northern cities, most businesses and financial institutions will only accept older issues of the currency--which were minted in Britain rather than Baghdad. One old man jokes that the Iraqi currency used to picture three horses, but now, he says, pointing to Saddam's picture, it pictures just one horse's ass. Elsewhere in Iraq, the comment would get him a firing squad.

Which brings me to the other great advantage of living in northern Iraq: freedom. While the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan administers Sulaymaniyah, and its rival, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, controls Irbil and Dohuk, the major cities are dotted with offices of other political parties--socialist, Communist, Islamist, Assyrian, and Turkoman. In the run-up to the May 26 municipal elections in Dohuk and Irbil, the banners and flyers of rival candidates and parties made the streets look like an American city in October. Many political parties print their own newspapers and operate their own TV stations. Students surf the Internet at northern Iraq's three universities and in the growing number of Internet cafes.

In teahouses and restaurants, patrons tell stories of how they were imprisoned or tortured by Saddam's government. One man was thrown in prison when his seven-year-old child repeated his criticism of the government to a first-grade teacher. Others--the Kurdish and Turkoman former residents of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk--tell stories of how they fled north from Saddam's ethnic cleansing in the oil-rich areas. This winter, hundreds huddled in a tent city outside Sulaymaniyah nicknamed the "Spring of Satan" while northern authorities tried to find them houses; Saddam's government had ejected them, then seized their property and turned it over to functionaries of his ruling Baath Party.

All of which helps explain why, despite the inconveniences, residents here don't want sanctions weakened--they want them strengthened. Indeed, when the Bush administration recently announced it was going to use "smart sanctions" to target the military--not Iraqi civilians--one farmer in a rural village asked rhetorically how the administration could talk about Saddam's war crimes one day and reward him the next. Didn't the United States care

that Saddam started two wars and used gas against Iraq's non-Arab population? Then again, whatever doubts northern Iraqis have about American resolve, it's better than the sheer disdain they feel for the French and the Russians, who, they say, sacrifice freedom to win lucrative contracts from Saddam. "Surely they understand that we hate Saddam," says one northern Iraqi deputy minister. "Once he is gone, we won't forget that they wanted to help him."

That attitude applies to military operations, too. Some in the north do criticize American bombing in the south, but only because they think it does not go far enough: They want a sustained military campaign to remove Saddam from power. People here also vigorously support the American- and British-enforced no-fly zones that protect the north's independence. People in Dohuk, just five minutes from Iraqi government lines, visibly relax when they hear Allied sorties flying overhead. They understand that the real menace to their well-being--and to that of their fellow Iraqis--isn't international pressure. It's the dictator to the south.

Michael Rubin, a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, recently returned from nine months in Iraq, where he was a Carnegie Council fellow working at northern Iraq's universities. ❖

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