

SADDAM'S VERDICT: A MILESTONE FOR WHAT?

Ofra Bengio

President George W. Bush characterized the condemning to death by hanging of Saddam Husayn as a milestone for Iraq. Indeed never before in the modern history of Iraq had a head of state been brought before a public judicial process to answer for his deeds. Some predecessors - King Faysal II, Nuri al-Sa`id and `Abd al-Karim Qasim – were summarily killed, either by the army or an inflamed mob. Saddam's trial, by contrast, lasted approximately two years and possessed at least a modicum of fairness. However, not everyone regarded the proceedings or the outcome as just, especially in Iraq.

Throughout the trial, Saddam continued to pose as the legitimate President of Iraq. Upon hearing the verdict, he repeatedly shouted "Long live the Iraqi people," and "Allahu Akbar". In doing so, Saddam once again was appealing to Arabs and Muslims throughout the world for support, as he had during the wars against Iran, Kuwait and the United States and its allies. In this case, at least, and regardless of its actual value for Saddam's own fight for life, the Sunni Arab "street" stood firmly behind him and against the verdict,

regarding the entire affair as unjust and humiliating to the Arab nation.

Saddam made it clear that if he were to lose the battle, he preferred a firing squad to the gallows. He certainly remembers how his idol, Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh, who had fought the British in 1941, was publicly hung in front of the ministry of defense. Another such scene surely etched in his memory was the hanging of nine Jews in Baghdad's main square in 1969, an act to which he had lent his own hand. Clearly, he did not wish to share a similar fate and become a laughing stock for a jeering, cheering mob.

In Iraq, the verdict has reinforced the already deep fissures among the populace which had developed during Saddam's long rule. Even though not all of Iraq's Sunni minority regarded him as a hero while in power, they now, along with many others among the Sunni Arab public, hailed him as a symbol of Iraqi unity and territorial integrity, and an Arab hero who had dared to stand up against the world's sole superpower. They view the prospect of death by hanging not only as an unjust punishment to Saddam but as a collective humiliation, as well



as an act that will rob Iraqi Sunnis of the one individual who could perhaps still tip the balance in their favor in war-torn Iraq. By contrast, and quite expectedly, Iraq's Shi'is and Kurds greeted the verdict with unbridled joy. For them, the hanging will symbolize an end to the worst epoch in their history and the beginning of an entirely new era, one in which they will be masters of their own fates and rulers of their respective core regions, if not the country as a whole.

What might be the long term implications of the conviction on Iraq's domestic political scene? In the past 3 1/2 years since the American-led war to overthrow the Ba`th regime, major developments - the capture of Saddam Husayn, the beginning of his trial, the promulgation of a new constitution and general elections - were depicted as constituting fundamental turning points in Iraq's history and stepping stones toward democracy, stability and tranquility for the historically turbulent country. The possibility of establishing a democratic Iraq may still be open to debate. However, there can be no doubt that instead of bringing Iraq closer to a state of stability and tranquility, these steps further worsened the situation. The question is, therefore, whether the verdict and its implementation will produce different results.

In fact, with or without the verdict, the country is moving rapidly toward further civil strife, if not full-fledged civil war. From the time of its creation after World War I, Iraq has been held together as a unified state by three elements, in one combination or another: a foreign power, the force of arms, and a strong leader. However, all three have disappeared since the 2003 war. True, the United States and some of its allies are still in Iraq with a force of 150,000 soldiers. Nevertheless, they cannot deliver the goods, because Iraq of the early twenty-first century is

totally different from that of 1920. Then, its British creators and overlords had to control a population of only two million people, as opposed to twenty-seven million highly politicized Iraqis today. Moreover, unlike the current US leadership, the British learned very quickly how to extract their land forces from the Iraqi mud by policing the country either with the help of their air force or through local indigenous forces. Finally, a foreign power, however strong it might be, cannot succeed in the task of nation-building or state-building of another country in the absence of sufficient indigenous power, political will or overriding interest in doing so.

As for the Iraqi army, which was dismantled shortly after the American occupation began, it has become quite clear that this was a fatal mistake. And one cannot turn the wheel back: The people who should have formed the basis of a new and unifying army can no longer act under one roof. The steadily increasing atomization and polarization of society; the establishment of a plethora of militias representing different groups and communities; and the spiraling cycle of mutual violent retributions all render the resurrection of the army a Herculean task.

Finally, the prospect for the emergence of another Saddam capable of bringing a semblance of order to the fractured polity of Iraq appears dim. Whether or not Saddam is actually hung, in the eyes of the Sunnis he will remain a symbol of their former elite status, while for the Kurds and Shi'is, his disappearance will symbolize a better future. With so much bad blood flowing between the different groups and communities, it is difficult to see how any leader can stop the carnage. After a generation of totalitarian rule, the "people" have reclaimed power, albeit with catastrophic consequences.