

Couldn't Be Worse?

Iraq After Saddam

Ofra Bengio

THE MAIN working hypothesis, taken almost as an act of faith and embraced by many Western policymakers and pundits since the end of the Gulf War, is that the West's "Iraq problem"—and most of Iraq's problems, too—would be easily solved once President Saddam Hussein disappeared from the scene. Some observers have therefore couched the "Iraq problem" as one of biology—meaning not the threat of Iraqi biological weapons, but rather Saddam's mortality.

Not all delusional thinking is based on ignorance, but this example is. The contention that Saddam's removal through death or incapacitation would solve most of the difficulties at hand is flawed on at least two counts, one having to do with the past, the other with the future.

First, it ignores the far-reaching changes that Saddam and the Ba'athi regime have wrought in Iraqi society and political culture. The havoc wreaked upon Iraq's socioeconomic system will take years to heal. The total castration of the political system will not be easy to repair either, even in the very unlikely event that a liberal-democratic regime

were to come to power in Baghdad. Finally, the mending of the fragmented Iraqi polity, now divided between a rump state controlled by the Ba'ath and two fractious Kurdish administrations in the north, will not be a simple matter.

Even more importantly, the "biology" approach ignores Saddam's own plans and preparations for Iraq's future. Saddam is determined to ensure that his legacies and the system he has built are perpetuated after his departure from this life. In this regard, several questions are pertinent: Is Saddam Hussein walking in the footsteps of the late Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, as well as other leaders in this region, in preparing a "hereditary presidency"? If so, what would such a regime be like? In specific institutional terms, what would be the fate of the three pillars on which the regime has been based for the last 33 years: the Ba'ath Party, the security services and the army?

Putting the House in Order

FOR MANY years Saddam has refrained from dealing with the issue of succession, for, like other absolute rulers, he could not imagine his roost ruled by anyone else. However, in the last few years he has plunged into the subject head-on. It is true that Saddam has made some spectacular mistakes, but he has shown a real propensity for anticipating and preparing

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for any venture or eventuality he deems to be important—and securing the succession and his legacy is one of them. Among his most critical tasks, therefore, has been to purge potential threats and rivals from within his own family. He has taken this precautionary measure not only out of fear for his own rule, but also to prepare the groundwork for his heirs.

Initially, Saddam had elevated his relatives to the highest posts in the country in a nepotistic manner that would almost shame a monarchical regime. Over time, however, he has begun to eliminate them, one after the other, not only politically, but in some cases physically, as well. For example, Saddam ordered the murders of his two cousins and sons-in-law, Hussein Kamil and Saddam Kamil, who fled in 1995 to Jordan (together with Saddam's two daughters) and made the terrible mistake of returning to their deaths in 1996.

Suffice it to say that by 2001, the entire family network of brothers, cousins, sons-in-law and brothers-in-law, who had once held key posts in the Ba'ath and constituted an important pillar of support for the regime, was gone except for one person—Saddam's cousin, 'Ali Hasan al-Majid. Majid has demonstrated his unquestioned loyalty to Saddam in repeated brutal acts, from supervising the chemical attack on the Kurds (in Halabja in 1988), to coordinating the elimination of other family members (the Kamils in 1996). Majid appears to have been left "in reserve", possibly to aid Saddam's heir in consolidating power during the transitional period.¹

Saddam's other important task has been to decide which of his two sons, 'Uday or Qusayy, should be groomed as heir apparent. He has made no open declaration, but it is clear that, at least for the time being, he has chosen the younger son, Qusayy. His choice is not difficult to understand. 'Uday has discredited himself by his unruly and literally murderous

behavior, his sexual and other excesses, his inflated ego, and his unbridled ambitions—all this in addition to a physical disability which is the result of an attempt on his life in 1996. However, 'Uday is not resigned to his father's decision. In the last two years a latent struggle for power has developed between 'Uday, who views himself as the rightful heir apparent, and Qusayy—or, more precisely, between 'Uday and his father, who is actively grooming his younger son to succeed him.

Saddam has tried to fob off 'Uday with membership in the National Assembly, the rubber-stamp Iraqi parliament. This does not appear to have worked, however. Mimicking his father's tactics, 'Uday has unleashed a propaganda campaign and promoted a personality cult via the print and broadcast media outlets under his control.² 'Uday's message to his father, his brother, and the rest of the country is clear: he is entitled to rule Iraq after his father, not only because he is the elder of the two brothers, but also because he is more capable. He portrays himself not simply as a replica of his father, but as better than the original. 'Uday is said to be smarter than his father (he has a doctorate); more pious (he grew a beard, and claims to know the Quran by heart; certainly, he quotes from it more lavishly than his father); and more popular (winning 99.99 percent of the vote in his election in 2000 to the National Assembly, against the 99.96 percent his father received in the 1995 presidential election). Most importantly, he has portrayed himself as being more liberal, democratic and "clean" than his

¹The latest victim was Saddam's cousin, 'Ala' Abd al-Qadir Sulayman, who sought asylum in Jordan but was refused and had to return to Baghdad. He had been working in Iraqi Intelligence since 1990.

²All sources for this essay are available from the editors upon request.

father. Attempting to appeal to the public over the heads of his father and brother, 'Udayy has intensified in the last two years his criticism of the work of different ministries, calling, for example, for corruption (and corrupt individuals) to be purged from the security and intelligence apparatus. He has pressed for the National Assembly to be granted real legislative powers, and for opening the political and economic systems to public participation. He also carefully calibrates his declarations for self-aggrandizement, even at his father's expense. In one of these, for example, he said: "We will not recognize Israel even if we are kept under an embargo for another hundred years." In another he called for the inclusion of Kuwait in the map of Iraq.

'Udayy's behavior has not endeared him to his father. To the contrary, it seems to have encouraged Saddam to accelerate his promotion of Qusayy to leadership in the centers of real power: the army, the security services and the Ba'ath Party. To emphasize Qusayy's closeness to his father, government media (which are not owned by 'Udayy), make a point of publishing cables of support from the younger son to his father (but only rarely from 'Udayy). And while 'Udayy has bragged about his role as supervisor of the paramilitary force, *Fida'iyyu Saddam* (Saddam's Commandos)—another bone that Saddam had thrown to him earlier on—Qusayy was made supervisor of the Republican Guard, a key post that ensures the very survival of the regime. Saddam has also reportedly granted Qusayy important positions in the military and security apparatuses, including roles as the head of the special security apparatus and as overseer of Iraqi state intelligence, military intelligence and general security. More alarming for 'Udayy has been the juxtaposition of his symbolic post (membership in the National Assembly) with Qusayy's appointment, in May 2001, to membership in the Ba'ath

Party Regional Command, one of the regime's three most important pillars. On the same occasion Qusayy was appointed to the key post of deputy chief (to his father) in the Ba'ath Party military bureau. Thus, short of announcing it explicitly, Saddam has signaled the centers of power in Iraq that Qusayy should be treated as the heir apparent.

All the while, Qusayy himself has remained in his father's shadow. His own introversion might account for this, but it is more likely a consequence of his father's effort to shield him from criticism, jealousies and acts of vengeance either from within the family or from outside of it. In the meantime, however, stories published abroad have begun to circulate about Qusayy's own atrocities, such as the execution in 1998 of 2,000 prisoners at his behest. Whatever the truth of such reports, it is certain that if Qusayy wishes to live up to his father's expectations, and to frustrate his brother's ambitions, he must develop a more commanding public persona. In the race between the "self-made" man, 'Udayy, and the "father-made" Qusayy, the latter appears now to have the better chances. But in the struggle for power that may ensue between them after Saddam's departure, anything could happen.

From the point of view of Iraq's abused citizens, its neighbors and other countries, it can hardly be assumed that a regime run by either brother would constitute an improvement on the status quo. Any significant improvement would depend on the state of institutions in Iraq, a matter to which we now turn our attention.

Balancing the Regime's Power Pillars

TO PREPARE the country for his heir and to perpetuate his own legacy, Saddam has reinforced the three pillars on which he has based his rule: the Ba'ath Party, the army,

and the security apparatus. In so doing, he has produced a new set of balances among and within these three critical institutions.

Of the three pillars, the most intriguing and difficult to assess is the Ba'ath Party. The Ba'ath is, numerically speaking, a large party—with branches in all parts of the country except for Kurdistan. It is a well-knit and well-organized group. In fact, it is the only organized civil institution inside Iraq. In the absence of a strong opposition party, and due to the total lack of a civil society in Iraq, the chances are good that any political vacuum would be filled by members of the Ba'athi ruling elite, especially since it holds the key civilian posts in the country and has vested interests in the continuation of the regime. Still, Saddam has embarked on a “face-lifting” project for the party. Thus, at the beginning of 2000, he required all party members to pass an examination (Saddam's biography was included in the material that had to be studied) with a view to, as he said, “increase the members' political and organizational consciousness and to strengthen their leadership abilities.” He also held several meetings with party members to raise morale. In addition, he ordered the establishment of new party branches in different parts of the country to bring new blood into the system—the young, women, Shi'a and others. This is reflected in the new Regional Command of May 2001 which has seven new faces, including Qusayy, an ex-military officer and a woman, which is quite a novelty. In addition, nine out of 19 members are Shi'a—the largest ever in the command.

Ideologically speaking, however, the Ba'ath is a spent force. Aware of this, Saddam is trying to turn it into an “Islamist” party by, among other things, ordering its members to memorize chapters of the Quran. In certain areas, too, the party has been partly superseded by what one might call “new-old forces”—

the tribes and the military. This is happening because, after 33 years of rule, the Ba'ath has become a very unpopular, indeed a hated and despised, institution. Its unpopularity has been magnified by the widespread corruption produced by the past decade of sanctions. While leading party members have been enriched, an ever-widening gap has developed between the leadership and the rank-and-file membership.

Yet despite its weaknesses and declining internal cohesion, the Ba'ath seems unlikely to disappear from the Iraqi political map. It may change its name, as the Communist Party did in Romania and elsewhere; or it may retain its name and compete with other forces, as the Communists did in Russia. Even if it is altogether dismantled as an organization, individuals and groups within the Ba'ath will continue to exert influence because the party has become a kind of class unto itself. Bureaucracies have ways of surviving, regardless of changes at the top. The influence of the party in post-Saddam Iraq will be a function of its ability to develop alliances with other power centers, such as the tribes and the military (especially the Republican Guard), before the succession actually takes place.

The security services, the regime's second pillar, play a special role in Iraq. In the entire history of the regime, there has been only one serious attempt to oust the Ba'ath from power, when chief of security Nazim Kzar tried in 1973. While his failure was not pre-ordained, it does point to certain inherent weaknesses within the security services that lessen the chance that they can be utilized to promote regime change. First, the security services, as their name indicates, are not one cohesive group but many organizations which, more often than not, compete with and spy on each other. Second, in order to successfully achieve a regime change, they still must rely on a political-civilian orga-

nization or group to fill the political vacuum—they themselves have no base among the population. Third, for all the talk of their being the Ba'ath's "institutes of fear", they are hardly a match for the military if a power struggle should ensue between them. Thus, it is unlikely that one security force, or even several of them, can successfully initiate a coup, let alone manage to keep power in the aftermath. Instead, the security services are likely to serve whatever individual and regime comes to power.

This leaves us with the third pillar, the military, as a possible agent of positive change. On this prospect there are opposing opinions among serious observers, including knowledgeable Iraqi dissidents and exiles. On one side are those who think that only the military is capable of masterminding a coup; on the other are those who think that the military is the least capable force in Iraq today.

Those who believe the latter base their argument on three important facts. First, the army is no longer one united body but rather two separate ones, divided between the Republican Guard and the regular armed forces (including the militia). Second, in 33 years of Ba'athi rule the regime has developed different mechanisms for controlling the military and neutralizing its potential to oust the regime, as had occurred regularly in pre-Ba'athi Iraq. Finally, the record is clear: the regime has been successful in nipping all attempted coups in the bud.

No doubt, however, many of those who raise these points do so because they desire to see regime change carried out in a democratic fashion. That may be to their credit, but the fact remains that, despite its problems, the army possesses important assets absent from both the party and the security forces. The army is the only force that can ensure the integrity of the Iraqi state. Relatively speaking,

it is not as tainted by corruption or a legacy of oppression as the other two power centers. Moreover, the masses find it easier to identify with the army, which they see as a victim of Saddam's grandiose dreams. The fact that many families lost sons in his futile wars increases rather than decreases popular identification with the army. Notwithstanding its division, the army is still the only force that can initiate a coup and control the aftermath. A coup could be masterminded by the Republican Guard, for example, coordinating with elements within the Ba'ath, or by joining with a popular uprising. What is important is that in the absence of a normal civil society, the growing power of the tribes and the strengthening of centrifugal forces—from the Kurdish and Shi'a communities—only the army can function as an effective national institution.

Saddam is well aware of the army's ability both to protect the regime and to threaten its survival. Therefore, he has cultivated its goodwill by, among other things, appointing ex-high-ranking officers to key posts in the administration, though not to the highest political echelons in the Ba'ath Party. Thus, as of last year nearly all of the 15 provincial governors were ex-high-ranking officers. Similarly, breaking a tradition of secrecy that forbade citing even the chief of staff by name, active high-ranking officers, especially the commander of the air force, are now given a measure of publicity. These changes may be motivated by a need to inspire awe among the population, coupled with Saddam's realization that only military officers can do this. If that is true, and it probably is, then it means that after 33 years of Ba'athi rule Iraq is back to square one: as before, the army is needed for regime survival and, more specifically, for preventing a popular uprising against the chosen new leader—Qusayy Saddam Hussein.

Alternative Futures for Iraq

WITH ALL this in mind, then, what kind of regime is most likely to develop in post-Saddam Iraq, if the matter were to remain exclusively in Iraqi hands? The answer depends in part on when and how Saddam departs. Saddam could die suddenly or unexpectedly (whether by natural or other causes), or he could remain in power for five to ten more years. In between these options are endless other possibilities: a palace coup launched by one of his sons or other relatives, a military coup staged by the Republican Guard, or a popular uprising that is joined by the military.

If Saddam disappears soon, a power struggle between 'Udayy and Qusayy is likely. Qusayy's chances are better in such a struggle because of his strong links with the army and his membership in the Ba'ath Party regional command, but his success is by no means guaranteed. In this scenario the Ba'ath Party would retain a hold on the country, for its members still hold key posts in the state and because no alternative civilian power centers have developed in the country. Moreover, with the sanctions still partly in place, the Ba'ath retains crucial leverage *vis-à-vis* both civilian society and the military. It still holds the key to the country's oil income and the distribution of food and basic needs for the population at large. The Ba'ath might have to deal with some recalcitrant tribes, hence its need to ally with other more docile ones and, even more importantly, with the army. In short, Saddam's sudden disappearance promises, at least in the short-run, a key role for the army, good chances for the Ba'ath to survive his death intact, a struggle for power between different individuals and groups (especially in the Hussein family), and an ensuing period of considerable instability.

If, however, Saddam survives for another five to ten years and then dies a natural death, then the chances for Qusayy to be his father's heir would increase. A long transition period will enable Qusayy to consolidate his control over the key centers of power and dispose of his opponents while his father is still in a position to assist him. On the other hand, a long transition period may reduce the Ba'ath's survivability. Erosion and fatigue within the organization is likely, thus jeopardizing its ability to function as a leading force. Tribal loyalties or new opposition groupings are likely to increase their influence as the party's power wanes. In this scenario, too, the army is likely to play a key role.

In either of these cases, or most scenarios in between them, several features of a post-Saddam Iraq are clear. First, the army will dominate Iraqi national politics, whether it safeguards the regime from its foes, itself initiates a coup against it, or controls the country by default in the aftermath of an upheaval. Second, the Ba'ath Party may well survive, and no political opposition at home or abroad will be able to match it for a long while. But third, the total stagnation of Iraqi politics, which has characterized the long years of Ba'athi rule, will most likely come to an end. The end of stagnation, however, could as easily lead to chronic and severe instability as to a benign opening up of Iraq's political and economic systems. Fourth, if either 'Udayy or Qusayy prevails after Saddam, the key personality of the regime will be essentially as ruthless and authoritarian as Saddam is today. Particularly since Saddam himself is now deeply engaged in preparing the country for post-Saddam Iraq, the chances are very likely that, even after his departure, we will see "business as usual" in Baghdad.

Therefore, anyone who imagines that, left to its own devices, post-Saddam

Iraq will become a democracy, or cease to seek weapons of mass destruction, or have qualitatively different relations with its neighbors, or be led by someone significantly less brutal than Saddam himself, has a difficult argument to make. There is simply no evidence for such a view.

This leaves us with no other conclusion than this: If the danger that Ba'athi Iraq poses to its own people, the Middle East and the United States is to end, that end will have to be prompted by forces external to Iraq. This does not mean that the United States and its allies will need to directly conquer, occupy and detoxify Iraq's political culture, for such an intru-

sive and protracted project may be too dangerous, unworkable or both. But it does mean that the United States must design a plan to influence and to work with the Iraqi army's leadership cadres in order to prevent either of Saddam's sons from continuing his life's work. Such a plan may need to include the use of force in support of lesser evils in a post-Saddam succession struggle. It may have been comforting in past years for some to have thought that such plans, and the risks they entail, would not be necessary. After September 11, however, the civilized world can no longer afford the illusion that the Iraq problem will simply take care of itself. □

Foggy

We are going after terrorism in a comprehensive way, not just in the present instance of Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, but terrorism as it affects nations around the world

—Secretary of State Colin Powell,
October 2, 2001



The Palestinian/Israeli issues affect the atmosphere of cooperation, but, essentially, these are, on some planes, two different things. One is that there are violent people trying to destroy societies, ours, many others in the world. The world recognizes that and we are going to stop those people.

On the other hand, there are issues and violence and political issues that need to be resolved in the Middle East [between] Israelis and Palestinians. But we all recognize that the path to solve those is through negotiation

I guess that's about as close as I can come to the kind of sophisticated analysis I'm sure you will want to do on your own. But they are clearly issues that are different, not only in geography but also, to some extent, in their nature.

—State Department spokesman Richard Boucher,
September 27, 2001