

What George Bush doesn't know about the nation of Iraq

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

If George Bush calculated that he could bring Iraq to its knees by continuing his hostile blockade of the country beyond the six-week air war, he is dead wrong. Although the year-old embargo has added countless victims to the number of war casualties (a number still kept under wraps) and threatens to eliminate the entire population through famine and epidemic disease, the will of the political leadership and the citizenry has not been broken. Ironically, the more the U.S. President threatens to renew bombing, foment ethnic strife, or prolong the sanctions, allegedly to force Saddam Hussein's ouster, the more the population rallies behind its President, who is viewed as the bulwark of resistance against an imperialist monster. One political insider in Baghdad put it this way: "They waged war against Iraq because Saddam Hussein said 'no.' The war was to be a lesson to the whole Third World: Anyone who bucks U.S. hegemony will get the same treatment. Our struggle is for the entire Arab world and the Third World, for humanity, not only Iraq. And we will continue to say no to Bush, no matter what the cost in suffering. Our people are willing to make sacrifices for the fight for dignity, truth, freedom and the rule of law."

As discussions with normal men and women in Iraq document, this was not political rhetoric. Discontent, of course, exists in the country, due to the inhuman conditions which the embargo has forced upon the civilian population. Real grievances can be heard from citizens, and many, fearing the renewal of U.S.-led air strikes, are understandably concerned about their personal safety and that of their families. But even voices which could be characterized as "anti-Saddam," from among Kurds, for example, are twice as shrill in their condemnation of the United States, Great Britain, and France. The *bête noire* in Iraq is not Saddam, but George Bush. The reasons for this are twofold: First, the nature of the war was such as to leave no doubts that the intended victim was the civilian population and its infrastructure. Second, the average Iraqi citizen's sense of personal identity is inextricably bound to an appreciation of a cultural tradition stretching back millennia.

'An inhuman, bestial war'

Anyone who lived through the war can document its atrocity from personal experience. Catholic priests relate how the windows of the Patriarchate of the Chaldean Church

in Baghdad were shattered on the first day of the air war, due to the explosion caused by bombs falling on a nearby ministry building. Even places of worship were not spared; the Armenian monastery and Syrian church in central Baghdad received direct hits from coalition aircraft bombing raids, as did the mosques in Baghdad and Basra. Men of religion cannot understand how Bush can call himself a Christian after having conducted such an "inhuman, bestial war," and believe that his career in the CIA must have instilled in him the lust to kill. High-school age youth, whose parents sought refuge for their families in outlying cities and towns, recount their weeks crammed 12 into a room, without sufficient food or water. Sixteen-year-old kids would venture out of the houses to dig into the earth for water to drink. Men who sent their wives and children into civilian bomb shelters at night, while they remained at home, quickly learned, after the Amaryia shelter bombing left 1,400 dead, that there was no place to hide. One young man of 19 related how he had lost both legs while in a civilian shelter beneath an administrative building in Baghdad.

Two men who survived the trek back from Kuwait, describe how the American bombers strafed the long convoy of disarmed military and civilian vehicles, unloading all the bombs they had. After the convoy had been stopped by destroyed vehicles, and passengers fled the cars for safety, artillery fire chased after "anything that moved."

No one who lived to tell such stories could doubt the criminal intent behind the prosecution of the war. Therefore, when George Bush's July 25 ultimatum drew near, no one doubted that the U.S. President would let loose another round of murderous bombings. In a certain sense, Iraq's citizens expect the war to begin again. At the same time, virtually no one gives credence to the alleged motivation driving the White House to renew hostilities.

The nature of the argument regarding Iraq's presumed nuclear capability is so patently contrived, that any taxi-driver will point up its paradoxical absurdity: "If Bush is threatening to bomb the nuclear sites, then he must know where they are. But if he knows where they are, why does he continue to demand that the government identify them? Why have the inspection teams not discovered all this weaponry?" Others ask quizzically, "Suppose Bush were right about the nuclear sites, and suppose he were to bomb them; wouldn't that bring about a

U.N. 'eases' embargo, maintains sanctions

The Permanent Five members of the U.N. Security Council have decided to adopt a variant of a French proposal which would allow Iraq to sell up to \$1.6 billion worth of petroleum, while continuing sanctions against that nation. The specifics of this "humanitarian" measure are so onerous, that one unidentified U.N. diplomat told the *New York Times* on Aug. 8 that "the U.N. has Iraq spread-eagled against the car and is going through its pockets. Iraq will never touch any of this money."

The reported conditions are:

- Iraq can sell \$1.6 billion of oil over the next six months. At current oil prices, the revenue would be about one-sixth of what Iraq was earning in a comparable period before the war.

- Proceeds of the oil sales will go directly to the U.N.

- Thirty percent of the proceeds will be used to pay Kuwait and other states for "war damages."

- Another large chunk will pay for International Atomic Energy Agency inspection teams, the destruc-

tion of Iraqi weapons, the expenses of redrawing the border with Kuwait, and other U.N.-imposed measures.

- The remainder of the funds, about 50%, some \$700 million, will remain under U.N. control, and will be used to buy food and medicine, and distribute it under guard. The food will not be distributed to members of the Iraqi military and their families, or to members of the ruling Ba'ath Party.

Iraqi Ambassador to the U.N. Abdul al-Anbari said that Iraq will reject the resolution: "Iraq won't accept it both as a matter of principle and a matter of practice. For all practical purposes, it allows Iraq to buy not one sack of rice or one sack of grain."

Iraqi Foreign Minister Ahmad Hussein on Aug. 3 had already described the French proposal as "a sugar-coated draft resolution which pretends to serve human values," but which in fact repudiates "all the noble and generous traits of our people, who are accustomed to eating their bread in dignity and who have been sacrificing their nearest and dearest to maintain this dignity." He concluded that the plan "compromises Iraq's national sovereignty, mortgages its independent free will, and imposes foreign tutelage over the Iraqi people. It also usurps prerogatives and responsibility of the legitimate government for the welfare of its citizens."

new Chernobyl for the whole region?" Anyone conversant with political realities of the region will bring up the other glaring paradox of the nuclear argument: "Bush claims Iraq was building the bomb, yet experts agree, if that were the case, it would be a decade away. Iraq has been a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and has accordingly allowed regular inspections of its programs, set up in all legality with the Soviet Union and France. Israel, on the other hand, has admitted having the bomb, yet has refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and has never allowed any inspections whatsoever."

The conclusion drawn by every thinking person, is that the nuclear argument, like those involving Kuwait, the Kurds, the Shiites, and so on, is a pretext, contrived to justify the annihilation of a country and a people.

Support for Saddam increases

Knowing this, Iraqis have not drawn back in fear, however. The mood prevailing in the capital is distinctly not one of capitulation. Quite the contrary. One gets the sense that as each day goes by and the embargo tightens its stranglehold over the life of 18 million human beings, their determination to resist increases. With it, their support increases for Saddam Hussein.

Computerized political profiles, such as those probably being scrutinized in think tanks in Washington, will provide

no easy explanation for why this is so. What determines the behavior of a people is not a Skinnerian stimulus-response mechanism, but underlying axiomatic beliefs, deeply embedded in thousands of years of culture and history. Thus, leading spokesmen for the ruling Ba'ath Party, like Dr. Elias Farah or Dr. Abdul Majeed al-Raf'i (see accompanying interviews), will point to the fact that the current onslaught against Iraq is but the most recent chapter in a book whose first pages date back 700 years. They refer to the sacking of Baghdad in 1258 at the hands of the Mongols, an event which not only destroyed the richest cultural center of the world at the time, but divided the Arab world for centuries to come. It is precisely the attempt to restore Arab unity around that highpoint of Arab culture, which they see as the target of the renewed hostilities today. As Dr. Farah put it, "Iraq had been targeted for its development, not only in the industrial and economic, i.e., material realm, but also in the spiritual realm . . . in its attempt to effect a renaissance" hearkening back to Baghdad as the cultural center which dialogued with the West "in a spirit of progress and humanism."

Although persons like these represent the country's elite, the philosophy which they articulate is alive in other layers of the population. One catches a glimpse of the same historical self-consciousness even in the proud gaze of the children victims of the war.