

Is Iraq on the way to being rehabilitated internationally?

by Muriel Weissbach-Mirak

In Baghdad and throughout the Arab world, there are great expectations that the embargo against Iraq, which has been in force for two and a half years, will be lifted sometime over the next six months through a shift in policy by the Clinton administration. Such a development, were it to materialize, would not only alleviate the suffering of a civilian population under extreme duress, but would also reshape the political kaleidoscope of the Middle East and Persian Gulf region. Whether this will inaugurate a new era of peace and development in the war-plagued region, or signify simply a timely gear-shift on the part of the Great Powers seated in Washington and London within a continued course of geopolitical maneuvers, will depend on the policy direction charted by the United States, and Europe.

That such a shift is under way is undeniable. The Iraqi government made no secret of its preference for Clinton during the final round of the U.S. election campaign. For example, flanking loud public denunciations of the incumbent presidency in all Iraqi media, one leading Iraqi newspaper, *Al Iraqi*, made the point bluntly, by serializing *EIR*'s explosive book, *George Bush: The Unauthorized Biography*, in 12 installments, the last appearing on Election Day. Even after Nov. 3 and Jan. 20, when unprovoked air strikes were launched by the defeated Bush and were upheld by the new White House, Baghdad responded not with belligerence, but with moderation.

By removing contested anti-aircraft installations in the south, and declaring a unilateral halt to hostilities, the Saddam Hussein government signalled unequivocally its willingness to turn over a new leaf, in hopes of defining a more amicable relationship with the United States. Though lodging protests against the unwarranted renewal of military aggression, which targeted civilian reconstruction efforts and even the Rasheed Hotel in the capital, Iraq's new Ambassador to the United Nations Nizar Hamdoon worked to cool tensions with the new President—a man he had known, while ambassador to the U.S., as the governor of the state that had supplied Iraq with generous quantities of rice before the war.

The embargo's heavy toll

There should be no mystery as to why Iraq should seek

out a different course with a different U.S. President. The toll taken by the war and the embargo on the economy and population has been horrendous. While no one will, perhaps, ever know how many casualties were suffered, children are still dying like flies, from malnutrition and disease, which a paralyzed health care system cannot remedy.

A recent report issued by Harvard Study Team doctor Eric Hoskins added a further, grotesque aspect of the war tragedy: An anomalous increase in the numbers of cancer cases among small children, particularly in the south around Basra, indicates that weapons unleashed during the 1991 aggression released lethal amounts of radioactivity into the air and water, contaminating the soil. Although Hoskins points to uranium shell missiles, fired by the "allies" against tanks, as the source of the cancer epidemic, it cannot be ruled out that other, utterly unconventional weapons were used, perhaps on an experimental basis, against the hapless population.

The continuing embargo has affected every aspect of life for every class of citizen. Foodstuffs are sold at astronomical prices on a thriving black market, and can be purchased only by persons able to put up for sale their own treasured goods, jewelry, family silver, and other belongings. Criminality has soared, as individual citizens are forced to seek any means to feed their starving families. This has threatened to undermine morality and morale. In the education system, schoolchildren cannot perform ordinary tasks, for the lack of pencils. Iraqi doctors, who number among the best in the world, have been cut off from all professional publications for two and a half years, and thus have been deprived of new medical discoveries and procedures. Even musicians, struggling to maintain excellence in culture, are hampered by the lack of strings for their instruments, not to mention the fruitful exchange of artists from abroad.

Rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure

This is not to imply that the country or its people have thrown in the towel. On the contrary, the reconstruction and new economic activity initiated since the war, represent an unparalleled achievement. Not only has major infrastructure (bridges, roads, electricity, water, etc.) been restored, but

the completion of the Third River project (see *EIR*, Feb. 12), and the plans for a Fourth River, promise to vastly expand the country's ability to produce food. The French daily *Le Monde* reported that the wheat and barley harvest this year had yielded 2.3 million tons. The search for self-sufficiency, made necessary by the blockade, has also led to the development of new industries in the civilian realm. Recent visitors to Iraq report that the country is producing its own automobiles and tractors, and has even started churning out threshing machines.

This effort, to rebuild and expand, expresses a deep commitment on the part of the government and people not to accept the logic of despair. One telling example is their response to the bombing of the Rasheed Hotel in downtown Baghdad. A visitor there at the time related that within minutes of the blast, a contingent of the Republican Guard arrived to assess the damage, and vowed to repair the extensive damage to the hotel within three days. By mobilizing inordinate numbers of workers, laboring on shifts day and night, they succeeded in the allotted time. A similar effort, over a period of months, yielded the complete restoration of the baby milk factory, which had been bombed to smithereens during the war. As one European diplomat, quoted by the Paris daily *Libération*, said, "The West has underestimated the Iraqis' ability to survive."

Geopolitics tilting back against Iran

Yet, no amount of autarkical reorganization of the economy can replace the normalcy of trade relations with the rest of the world. Thus the need to defeat the embargo fully.

Moves in the direction of political mediation became visible after Clinton took office, most prominently in early February, when Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat travelled to Baghdad for talks with the Iraqi leadership. In January, PLO Executive Committee member Mahmoud Abbas had made a visit to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia—the first such visit by any PLO representative since the war—and on that occasion had apologized for the backing the PLO gave to Iraq during the war. Although the PLO later qualified his statements as "personal views," the way had been opened for PLO leader Arafat to mediate a rapprochement among the anti-Iraq Gulf states and Baghdad. Arafat's message, representing the results of consultations with Gulf leaders and other Arab states such as Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria, was that Baghdad should signal further willingness to reach a solution with the former belligerents. On return to Amman, Jordan, Arafat told the press that Saddam Hussein had "encouraged us to continue in our attempts to achieve real peace" in the "peace talks" begun in December 1991 under U.S. auspices. This represented a 180-degree turn away from Baghdad's earlier rejectionist position vis-à-vis the talks. Although very few if any Arab leaders—certainly not Saddam Hussein—believe anything substantial will emerge from the negotiations, the gesture was a pregnant

one, and was read as such.

Thus, step by step, it can be expected that each side will appear to make concessions until a solution can be found. Iraq will be expected to give more than it receives. What the precise contours of a rapprochement will be is not known, but certain shadings are already visible. Leading spokesmen for the Iraqi government, Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, hinted at one aspect in remarks made to the effect that they thought that the United States, the West in general, and the formerly hostile Arab nations, would have an interest in mending fences with Iraq, in view of the greater strategic danger posed by Iran. The animosity between Iraq and Iran is not new, since neither has forgotten the tragic loss of human life suffered during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war.

But the remarks made by Baghdad leaders come now in the context of a new western campaign against Teheran. Murmurings in the western press over the last six months have grown into a thunder of verbal denunciations against Iran, identified as the one oil-producing nation in the region capable of posing a military threat to Israel. Coupled with the Israeli deportation of the Islamist Hamas movement members to southern Lebanon, with the continuing government crackdowns in Algeria and Egypt against Muslim "fundamentalists" and with the genocide against the predominantly Muslim population in Bosnia, the barrage of press attacks against Iran spell out a clear geopolitical policy line issuing from London, Washington, and Tel Aviv, that the "new enemy image" is Islamic "fundamentalism," and, by extension, Muslims worldwide.

The danger, therefore, lurking in an otherwise welcome relaxation of tensions between the U.S. and Iraq, is that the Arab world may be manipulated once again into playing the role of so many pawns on the geopolitical chessboard known as the Great Game. The Anglo-Americans, as well as their Saudi allies, know perfectly well that Iraq's re-entry into the community of nations, particularly oil-producing nations, would have a dramatic effect in driving down the world price of oil. To shore it up, they could conceivably seek conflict with oil-giant Iran, to balance not only power in the region, but also the price of oil.

The only way in which the rapprochement, if it materializes, can contribute to durable peace lies in a radical shift, not in regional politics, but in global economic policy. If the Clinton administration seriously desired normal relations with Iraq, it would have to abandon the previous administrations' insanities, and embark on a course of economic reconstruction, to lead the world out of the depression. If, on the contrary, it thinks it can merely change posture, transforming yesterday's enemy into today's friend, and lure along the rest of the Arab world into a new geopolitical gamble lined up against "Islam," then it will be igniting a series of wars which will make the catastrophe of 1991 look like a local skirmish.