

## ARTICLES

by JEREMY SCAHILL

## INSIDE BAGHDAD

AP PHOTO/DAVID GUTTENFELDER

There's an old Arab saying that Iraqis like to quote when talking about another US war against their country: "The wet man is not afraid of the rain."

With talk of war dominating every conversation in the days just prior to the US decision to move ahead with invasion plans despite a lack of sanction, men told stories of their time in the Iraqi Army during the first Gulf War, against Iran. "I went there almost unable to grow a beard and I came back with a head of gray hair," said Ahmed, who spent seven years on the frontlines of the bloody eight-year war between Baghdad and Teheran. (As with all the ordinary Iraqis quoted in this piece, his name has been changed.) Almost every Iraqi household lost someone in the war. They had only two years to struggle for a return to any semblance of a normal life when Iraq invaded Kuwait, sparking the second Gulf War, which took the lives of more than 200,000 Iraqis. The rest, as one Iraqi put it, was "our well-known destiny."

"I know war too much. With wars I am like Sylvester Stallone, like Rocky. We had too many sequels. We don't need another," said Mohammed, whose days are now consumed by sleep and his nights by listening to shortwave radio.

The official line from the Iraqi leadership is that every citizen will resist an attempted US invasion. The government has been staging regular military parades in cities across Iraq. Saddam Hussein, once the guest of honor at such events, has not appeared

in public for years. Instead, the red-mustached Vice Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, Izzat Ibrahim, sits on balconies above the parade grounds, saluting the soldiers as they march past.

Some carry unloaded Kalashnikovs, others are dressed in white Hezbollah-type garb with fake sticks of dynamite strapped to their chests. Members of the volunteer Al Quds (Jerusalem) Army, originally formed to "liberate" Jerusalem, have pictures of Saddam taped to their chests. Women in black hijab march in unison, some throwing mint candies on the ground. At times, the marches resemble a children's Halloween parade. Indeed, there are children's divisions. But the faces of the ordinary army soldiers in these parades tell a sad tale. They look tired, nervous and beaten down. Commanding officers shout orders at the men to keep in step.

Months ago, when a US attack seemed like an event far in the distance, people spoke enthusiastically about "fighting the Americans." But the war quickly grew imminent and the people knew it. Panic set in.

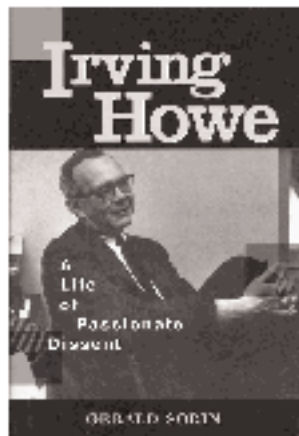
Iraqi forces have dug large pits in areas throughout the capital, some of them as deep as four to five yards. Foreign diplomats and Iraqi officials say the holes will soon be filled with oil. The point, they say, is to torch them at the onset of attacks to create a black cloud over Baghdad to confuse laser-guided

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munitions. Also, many Iraqis say they have heard that the army will dump oil into the Tigris River, which stretches past the main presidential palace and several key government buildings. As with the pits around Baghdad, the plan is to set fire to the Tigris to shroud the center of power with thick black smoke.

Over the past several weeks, Baghdad's streets have gotten a bit barer. Many Iraqis have left the capital for homes in rural parts of the country or for Syria or Jordan. Through shortwave radio or relatives abroad, they've heard the reports of 3,000 missiles hitting Baghdad in the opening days of war. Some people speak of wanting to escape what they think will be a carpet-bombing; others say they are going there to wait. "Many of us are stockpiling petrol so we can leave Baghdad. Iran is very close, and we hear they will have camps there and everything. If America tells us to leave Baghdad, we will leave and wait," said Ali, an older Iraqi.

But people are not just fleeing the capital because of the expected American onslaught. In totally separate conversations, several Iraqis said they also fear that Saddam Hussein will use chemical or biological weapons if his government is rapidly disintegrating. Some cited this as a primary reason for leaving urban areas. "We have heard him say that if he goes, he will turn all of Baghdad into dust, into a desert," said a Baghdad man, moving his fingers as though sifting through sand. Several Iraqis repeated versions of this story on different occasions. "We've seen it before," said a Sunni Muslim who fought in the Iraqi Army against Iran. "We don't know what he has but we know who he is." His friend interrupts him. "You wouldn't even be saying this if it weren't for the American threats. Even if Saddam gasses us, it will be Bush's fault. It will be because of America. He wouldn't do it if there wasn't a war. Maybe Bush wants that."

Those Iraqis who expressed fears of chemical or biological weapons said they didn't fear they would be used against US forces, but against rebellious Iraqis. Several people in Baghdad predict widespread unrest in the vast, overcrowded slum neighborhood of Saddam City in the event of war. "It's 90 percent Shiite. There will definitely be problems there," said an Iraqi Shiite Muslim. "Saddam doesn't love Shiites. He doesn't love Iraqi people. He loves himself, his friends, his family. He doesn't love us." After the Gulf War, Baghdad did not fall victim to the antigovernment uprisings that spread across southern and northern Iraq. This time around, the inverse could occur, with rural Iraqis largely staying in their homes while Baghdadians rebel. Many Iraqis speak of the specific Baathists they are going to go after once they get the chance.

In southern Iraq, people predict that the ordinary army will remain in their barracks or simply desert. Kamil, a Shiite Muslim living in Baghdad who has two sons in the army in the south, says, "I tell them, if the war comes, don't fight. When you get your chance, keep your gun and come home."

Perhaps it's twenty years of unending war and sanctions; perhaps it's the tremendous repression; likely, it's everything together,

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## RACE & CLASS



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but Iraqis want it all to end. They are exhausted and, most of them, miserable. In the early stages of the imposition of the US-led sanctions against Iraq, US officials made clear that Iraqis would be made to suffer until Saddam Hussein was no longer in power. The last decade has represented one of the most brutal campaigns of targeting innocent civilians to achieve Washington's policy aims. The constant bombing, the massive shortages of medicine, the rapid decimation of a once-proud middle class, the tens of thousands of innocent children withering away in filthy hospital beds, the unclean drinking water, the total dependence on the government for food, have all made ordinary Iraqis pay an incredible price for a government over which they have no control.

Still, the current crisis has brought to the surface a vibrant political debate. Some Iraqis say they will fight the Americans "even with sticks," some that they hope for a coup. Others say they will remain in their homes through a crisis and see how the chips fall, and still others, that they would welcome change at any cost.

Sometimes the comments are whispered, but sometimes they are spoken quite publicly. A taxi driver polishing a car is asked by a foreigner, "Is that a new car?" "No," says the driver in clear English. "I will get a new car after the war. I'm going to take a Mercedes from Saddam Hussein's palace."

On a crowded street in Baghdad, an old Iraqi man looks around before saying, "I'll tell you something you probably aren't allowed to hear: We want him gone." The man says that thirteen years ago, he was a trader with businesses in Kuwait. "His invasion ruined me. I don't care who comes in here. Anyone is better than this bastard."

There is also a sense that people are fed up with the psychological pressures and threats they have lived under for decades. Several people tell of incidents in which even their children got them into trouble. One man told a story of his 8-year-old son telling his teacher, "My daddy is smarter than the president."

"Who told you that?" the teacher asked the boy.

"My mommy."

That night the teacher called the house to "warn" the family against teaching children the "wrong" things.

"All of us live our lives with a razor blade caught in our throats," said an older Iraqi man, as his son tried to stop him from continuing his statement. "We can still breathe, but if we pull the razor out we die. If we push it down our throat we die. This is our life."

"Saddam has turned us all into liars," said a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war. "You know, when we go to the mosques and pray, we cannot even trust the man kneeling next to us." Iraqis speak of an extensive network of Baath Party informants in every neighborhood. They report to the party on the views and activities of their neighbors. Some Iraqis join the party just to alleviate the misery. Others endure, saying they couldn't live with themselves if they joined. "My personal independence is all I have left," said a Baghdad resident.

There is no question that hatred of the US government is strong in Iraq, regardless of what people think of Saddam. And

few accept that America has any right to overthrow the Iraqi government. Iraqis have seen what occupation looks like, both through British colonization of Iraq and through the lens of the Palestinians. "We don't want Saddam, but that doesn't mean we want America, either," said Mazen, an unemployed engineer. He said his father's name is Jihad. The name, Mazen said, was given because his grandfather fought against the British colonialists in the 1920s. "It's in my family blood. We will not accept a foreign invader or occupier, even if it damns us to more years under an Iraqi dictator. At least he is one of us."

But even those people who would welcome a US victory over Saddam are concerned about what might come after. People across the map say they fear a civil war that would pit the surviving Baathists and loyalist forces of the regime against masses of angry civilians and disaffected army deserters. Some Christians say they also fear that Islamic fundamentalists will attack them. Over the past twelve years, Iraq has seen a rapid desecularization of its society, and Islamic groups hope to replace the Baathist government with an Islamic state. "You know why we Christians want Saddam to stay in power?" asks a restaurant owner in Baghdad. "Because he is protecting us from radical Muslims. He

always has done this, and if he goes, we are afraid what will happen to us."

The saddest stories of all here are the people who believe that a US war will result

in an immediate and qualitative change in the conditions under which they currently are forced to live. For many, hope is the only thing they have left. Without it, there would be no point in continuing. They have been told that if the proverbial "He" goes, everything will change. And, as humiliating as it is, some have now chosen to believe it.

Few Iraqis are even aware—though it has been stated quite publicly by officials in Washington—that George W. Bush doesn't want a change of regime in Iraq, he wants a change of president. Few are aware of the acknowledgment by the UN in internal documents that a "new" regime will retain most of the current agents of repression; that many of the current apparatchiks will remain in their positions.

Over the past decade, well-paid think-tank pundits, expensive PR firms and US policy-makers through successive administrations have worked hard at preparing the grounds to make America the great liberator. All the while, they have ignored, denied, dismissed the unending punishment they have wrought on countless thousands of innocent Iraqis, laying all the blame at the feet of their once convenient ally, Saddam.

Even if some Iraqis celebrate in the streets if Saddam's government is brought down, it will reflect no success of US policy. It will simply represent a violent end to a horrifying chapter in the vast, unfinished book of Iraq. It will be the fruits of a merciless economic and military war waged against the innocent for twelve years. Regardless of what happens, it is the ordinary Iraqis—the doctors, the engineers turned taxi drivers, the shoeshine boys, the mothers and fathers—who should be praised for having found the will to live and the will to survive a heartless war waged against them by a superpower and a tyrant. ■

*'We don't want Saddam, but that doesn't mean we want America, either.'*

*—An unemployed engineer in Baghdad*

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