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The Wages of Corruption From Iraq to Britain



View of downtown Baghdad, March 2017. Photograph Source: MohammadHuzam – [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

I used to consider myself something of a specialist on corruption in Iraq, so I was not too surprised when I read of Iraq's "theft of the century" when \$2.5 billion was stolen from the tax authorities in Baghdad in a well-planned operation in which several senior officials were clearly complicit. This is all in the rich tradition of Iraqi kleptocracy. For further details see [Middle Easy Eye magazine](#) which has been particularly good on this story.

But the Iraqis are not correct in claiming "the theft of the century" for themselves because Britain may be out-competing them. For evidence of this, look no further than the headline from a report from the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee which reads "£4

billion of unusable PPE bought in first year of pandemic will be burnt “to generate power”, published on 10 June 2022.

Go on to read comments by Dame Meg Hillier MP, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, who said:

“The story of PPE purchasing is perhaps the most shameful episode [in] the UK government response to the pandemic. At the start of the pandemic health service and social care staff were left to risk their own and their families’ lives due to the lack of basic PPE. In a desperate bid to catch up the government splurged huge amounts of money, paying obscenely inflated prices and payments to middlemen in a chaotic rush during which they chucked out even the most cursory due diligence.”

Can we compare the \$2.5 billion stolen in Iraq to the £4 billion worth of useless PPE equipment supplied under dodgy contracts in Britain? Surely it is understandable that in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic, mistakes will be made, argue British government ministers in mitigation of what went on. Don’t believe a word of this. It is precisely during such moments of crisis that the corrupt of the earth spot their opportunity to bypass official scrutiny – due diligence – and launch their plundering expeditions.

Oil Follies

Only an economist could have thought up the latest attempt to curtail Russian oil revenues by a cap on the oil price paid to them. The idea is that Russian oil exports will still flow so there are no shortages and the price of crude does not go up, but the Russians will not make so much money. Fat chance.

Many problems are involved in implementing this strange and naïve scheme, such as the fact that it requires a degree of Russian cooperation which it certainly will not get. The price being set which may be around \$60 a barrel is above what the Russians are getting for at least part of their exports. Currently Europe does get Russian oil – but by way of Chinese oil refineries and other third parties. Here is a mammoth piece from the *Financial Times* explaining what is happening.

Beneath the Radar

At the heart of the protests in Iran are the Iranian Kurds and they are the prime target for Iranian government repression. This is not surprising as it was the death in custody of a Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, at the hands of the “morality police” on 16 September that sparked the protests. Although she was Sunni, her killing ignited protests among the Shia majority, and most especially among young and educated women.

Thousands of heavily armed Basij paramilitaries are flooding into the Kurdish region in north-west Iran to crush dissent. The government in Tehran wants to portray protests as being fomented by exiled groups and hostile foreign states like the US and its allies. As in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, the Kurdish minority is a scapegoat whose harsh punishment will be a warning to others.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of War in the Age of Trump (Verso).

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