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The American Legacy in Iraq

A Black Hole of History

by BARRY LANDO

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The last thing the U.S. should do is become militarily embroiled in the conflict raging again in Iraq. But for Americans to shake their heads in lofty disdain and turn away, as if they have no responsibility for the continued bloodletting, is outrageous. Why? Because America bears a large part of the blame for turning Iraq into the basket case it's become.

The great majority of Americans don't realize that fact. They never did. So much of what the U.S. did to Iraq has been consigned by America to a black hole of history. Iraqis, however, can never forget.

In 1990, for instance, during the first Gulf War, George H.W. Bush, called on the people of Iraq to rise up and overthrow Saddam Hussein. But when they finally did, after Saddam's forces were driven from Kuwait, President Bush refused any gesture of support, even permitted Saddam's pilots to keep flying their deadly helicopter gunships. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were slaughtered.

[H.W. Bush later denied any responsibility for that uprising, but you can hear his appeal to the Iraqis in a documentary I produced with Michel Despratx, "The Trial of Saddam Hussein."]

Even more devastating to Iraq was the Draconian embargo that the United States and its allies pushed through the U.N. Security Council in August 1990, after Saddam invaded Kuwait.

The embargo cut off all trade between Iraq and the rest of the world. That meant everything, from food and electric generators to vaccines, hospital equipment—even medical journals. Since Iraq imported 70 percent of its food, and its principal revenues were derived from the export of petroleum, the sanctions dealt a catastrophic blow, particularly to the young.

Enforced primarily by the United States and Britain, the sanctions remained in place for almost 13 years and were, in their own way, a weapon of mass destruction far more deadly than anything Saddam had developed. Two U.N. administrators who oversaw humanitarian relief in Iraq during that period, and resigned in protest, considered the embargo to have been a “crime against humanity.”

Early on, it became evident that for the United States and England, the real purpose of the sanctions was not the elimination of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction, but of Saddam Hussein himself, though that goal went far beyond anything authorized by the Security Council.

The effect of the sanctions was magnified by the wide-scale destruction of Iraq’s infrastructure—power plants, sewage treatment facilities, telephone exchanges, irrigation systems—wrought by the American air and rocket attacks preceding the first Gulf War. That infrastructure has still to be completely rebuilt.

Iraq’s contaminated waters became a biological killer as lethal as anything Saddam had attempted to produce. There were massive outbreaks of severe child and infant dysentery. Typhoid and cholera, which had been virtually eradicated in Iraq, also packed the hospital wards.

Added to that was a disastrous shortage of food, which meant malnutrition for some, starvation and death for others. At the same time, the medical system, once the country’s pride, careened toward total collapse. Iraq would soon have the worst child mortality rate of all 188 countries measured by UNICEF.

There is no question that U.S. planners knew how awful the force of the sanctions would be. In fact, the health calamity was coolly predicted and then meticulously tracked by the Pentagon’s Defense Intelligence Agency. Its first study was entitled “Iraq’s Water Treatment Vulnerabilities.”

Indeed, from the beginning, the intent of U.S. officials was to create such a catastrophic situation that the people of Iraq—civilians, but particularly the military—would be forced to react. As Denis Halliday, the former U.N. humanitarian coordinator for Iraq, put it to me, “the U.S. theory behind the sanctions was that if you hurt the people of Iraq and kill the children particularly, they’ll rise up with anger and overthrow Saddam.”

But rather than weakening Saddam, the sanctions only consolidated his hold on power. “The people didn’t hold Saddam responsible for their plight,” Halliday said. “They blamed the U.S.

and the U.N. for these sanctions and the pain and anger that these sanctions brought to their lives.”

Even after the sanctions were modified in the “Oil for Food Program” in 1996, the resources freed up were never enough to cover Iraq’s basic needs. Hans von Sponeck, who also resigned his post as U.N. coordinator in Iraq, condemned the program as “a fig leaf for the international community.”

By 1999 a UNICEF study concluded that half a million Iraqi children perished in the previous eight years because of the sanctions—and that was four years before they ended. Another American expert in 2003 estimated that the sanctions killed between 343,900 and 529,000 young children and infants—certainly more young people than were ever killed by Saddam Hussein.

Beyond the deaths and wholesale destruction, the sanctions had another equally devastating but less visible impact, as documented early on by a group of Harvard medical researchers. They reported that four out of five children interviewed were fearful of losing their families; two-thirds doubted whether they themselves would survive to adulthood. They were “the most traumatized children of war ever described.”

The experts concluded that “a majority of Iraq’s children would suffer from severe psychological problems throughout their lives.”

Much more chilling, is the fact that the Harvard study was done in 1991, after the sanctions had been in effect for only seven months. They would continue for another 12 years, until May 22, 2003, after the U.S.-led invasion.

By then, an entire generation of Iraqis had been ravaged. But rather than bringing that nightmare to an end, the invasion unleashed another series of horrors.

Estimates of Iraqis who died over the following years, directly or indirectly due to the savage violence, range up to 400,000. Millions more became refugees.

But there was more. The military onslaught and the American rule that immediately followed, destroyed not just the people and infrastructure of Iraq, but the very fiber of the nation. Though Saddam’s tyranny was ruthless, over the years the country’s disparate peoples had begun living together as Iraqis, in the same towns and neighborhoods, attending the same schools, intermarrying—slowly developing a sense of nationhood.

That process was shattered by the American proconsuls who took charge after the invasion. They oversaw a massive political purge, a witch hunt, that led to the gutting of key ministries, the collapse of the police and military and other key government institutions, without creating any viable new structures in their place. The Shiites who the U.S. helped bring to power took revenge on the Sunnis, many of whom had backed Saddam.

The result was catastrophic. Frightened Iraqis turned for security to their own tribal or sectarian leaders. Local militias flourished. The violence spiraled out of control. Thousands perished in a horrific surge of ethnic cleansing.

Through bribery and political arm twisting, the U.S. was able to tamp down the conflagration it had helped ignite. Underneath, however, the distrust and hatred continued smoldering.

And then, in 2011, the U.S. troops pulled out. President Maliki continued pouring oil on the fire, refusing to give Sunnis and Kurds a share of power. And now, fed by the conflict in neighboring Syria, Iraq is once again caught up in bloody turmoil.

And who is having to deal with all this? The generation of Iraqis that the Harvard researchers had long labeled “the most traumatized children of war ever described.” The majority of whom “would suffer from severe psychological problems throughout their lives.”

It is they now, who have come of age. It is they who, if they have not fled the country, are the military and police commanders, the businessmen and bureaucrats and newspaper editors, the tribal chiefs and sectarian leaders, the imans and jihadis and suicide bombers—all of them now still caught up in the ever-ending calamity of Iraq.

That, America, is the legacy you helped create for Iraq. How do you deal with it? God knows.