IRAQ Briefing

Amman/Brussels, 4 December 2002

international crisis group

VOICES FROM THE IRAQI STREET

I. OVERVIEW

As this briefing paper went to press, all eyes were on the United States and United Nations, the weapons inspectors, war preparations and the Iraqi regime's posture toward them. Yet, as has been true throughout this crisis, the unknown variable in the equation is the view of the Iraqi population. Living under a highly repressive and closed regime and bereft of genuine means of expression, the Iraqi people have largely appeared to the outside world as passive bystanders in a crisis that is bound to affect them more than anyone else. Speculation about how Iraqis view the current crisis has varied widely, with assessments often tailored to buttress political arguments regarding the wisdom of a U.S.-led war.

Proponents of regime change typically assume that the Iraqi people would favour or even welcome an invasion leading to the overthrow of the regime. For example, making the case for an American military operation and referring to the Iraqi regime's record of repression and human rights violation, Professor Ajami asserted: "We shall be greeted, I think, in Baghdad and Basra with kites and boom boxes".[1] But concern for the Iraqi people and their suffering also has been cited in support of the opposite case. Under this view, ordinary Iraqis are believed to oppose any military intervention – and military intervention by the U.S. in particular – based on fear of its inevitable human and material costs, patriotic rejection of outside interference, and longstanding resentment of the U.S. for its sanctions policy.[2] The goal of this briefing paper is to go beyond such assumptions and offer a snapshot of what Iraqis on the ground are saying about the ongoing crisis, their immediate concerns and their visions of the future.

On-the-ground research is constrained, of necessity, by several factors. The nature of the regime is a key consideration. Outside researchers face significant obstacles, and security concerns are critical – those of the interviewer as well as those of the interviewee whose anonymity must be preserved. Moreover, the Iraqis interviewed for this briefing paper do not constitute a scientific or representative sample. ICG has sought to talk to individuals from different backgrounds, belonging to various age brackets, walks of life, and religious groups.[3] Nevertheless, a majority of the dozens of Iraqis who were interviewed at some length and in a number of cases on more than one occasion came from urban areas, principally Baghdad and Mosul. This paper and the statements made by Iraqis should be read and filtered with these limitations in mind.

Still, during the course of a three-week field-visit undertaken in Baghdad, Mosul and Najaf in September-October 2002, ICG found virtually all Iraqis with whom it spoke to be far more willing then expected – and surprisingly more willing than on prior occasions[4] – to talk openly and shed some light on their attitudes toward the regime, the opposition, and a possible U.S.-led war. This fact alone is a strong indication of the regime's diminished ability to instil fear and of the feelings shared by many Iraqis that some kind of political change is now unavoidable. ICG also found

[1] Cited in David Von Drehle, Debate over Iraq Focuses on Outcome, *The Washington Post*, 7 October 2002.

[2] The American anti-war movement Voices in the Wilderness posts diaries on its website describing the lives of ordinary Iraqis and recording their hostility toward U.S. policy. According to one such entry, the Iraqi people oppose an invasion because "they will bear the brunt of this war, people who have done absolutely nothing to the United States or its citizens." Hence, "many people tell us they will fight if America invades Iraq." See http://iraqpeaceteam.org/pages/diaries/html.

[3] ICG's fieldwork did not cover Iraqi Kurdistan, and these conclusions, therefore, do not purport to reflect sentiment there. A separate, forthcoming ICG report will examine the situation in Kurdistan.

[4] The ICG researcher who conducted the present interviews has visited Iraq and conducted similar interviews on five previous occasions, most recently in July 2001.

unanticipated homogeneity in the views of those it interviewed. The most notable conclusions to be drawn from ICG's interviews are:

- The Iraqi regime is embarked, its diplomatic efforts aside, on a multi-faceted endeavour both to co-opt large segments of the population and to tighten its control.
- For many Iraqis, a U.S. strike now appears inevitable, and preparations are being made in light of it. Indeed, in a number of instances, Iraqis seemed to be making life-plans based on that assumption, dividing between pre- and post-intervention periods.
- Attitudes toward a U.S. strike are complex. There is some concern about the potential for violence, anarchy and score settling that might accompany forceful regime change. But the overwhelming sentiment among those interviewed was one of frustration and impatience with the status quo. Perhaps most widespread is a desire to return to "normalcy" and put an end to the abnormal domestic and international situation they have been living through. A significant number of those Iraqis interviewed, with surprising candour, expressed their view that, if such a change required an American-led attack, they would support it.[5]
- Thoughts about a post-Saddam Iraq remain extremely vague and inarticulate. Iraqis at home appear genuinely uninterested in topics that currently are consuming both exiled Iraqis and the international community – such as the make-up of a successor regime and the question of federalism as a means of accommodating the conflicting political aspirations of Iraq's various communities, in particular the Kurds. The Iraqi regime's repression has devastated civil society and any autonomous form of political organisation. The result is a largely depoliticised and apathetic population. The opposition in exile, touted by some in the international community as the future foundation of Iraq's political structure, is viewed with considerable suspicion and, in some instances, fear. The notion of leaving the country's destiny in the hands of an omnipotent foreign party has more appeal than might be expected – and the desire for a long-term U.S. involvement is higher than anticipated.

It should not be assumed from this that such support as might exist for a U.S. operation is unconditional. It appears to be premised on the belief both that any such military action would be quick and clean and that it would be followed by a robust international reconstruction effort. Should either of these prove untrue – if the war proved to be bloody and protracted or if Iraq lacked sufficient assistance afterwards – the support in question may well not be very long sustained.

Nor does all this mean that another war is either advisable or inevitable. Even in the event some significant "further material breach" is established within the meaning of UN Security Council Resolution 1441, the costs of military intervention – in terms of loss of life, material and economic damage, regional spillover effects, hardening the attitudes of future generations of Arabs and distracting from and even complicating a war on terrorism that, as recent events demonstrate, remains unfinished – must be carefully balanced against potential benefits, with the impact of intervention or non-intervention on the credibility of the UN itself of course having to be part of the calculation.

What ICG's field findings do say, rather, and in stark terms, is that a wide gulf separates the attitude of Iraqis from that of much of the rest of the world. For the international community, the principal question today is whether war should or should not be waged. For the Iraqi people, who since 1980 have lived through a devastating conflict with Iran, Desert Storm, a decade of sanctions, international isolation and periodic U.S./UK aerial attacks, a state of war has existed for two decades already. The question is not whether a war will take place. It is whether a state of war finally will be ended.

II. THE REGIME

Over recent months, the Iraqi regime has multiplied international and domestic initiatives in hopes of either averting or preparing for a war. Internationally, it has displayed uncharacteristic activism, responding positively (albeit grudgingly) to UN proposals, inviting Western visitors, including a plethora of journalists previously denied entry to the country, French and U.S. legislators and former weapons

[5] Equally significant, virtually none of the respondents expressed the contrary view, with the exception of a few non-Muslims anxious about their status in a future Shiite-dominated Iraq.

inspector Scott Ritter and seeking to mobilise Arab public opinion.[6] In March 2002, Iraq showcased its participation in the Arab League meeting in Beirut, using the occasion to seek a symbolic normalisation with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. During that Summit, Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri, the Vice-President of the Revolutionary Command Council, for the first time recognised Kuwait's sovereignty.[7] Since then, Iraq and Saudi Arabia have reopened their border and signed a free trade agreement, and Iraq has returned roughly 100 tons of archives it had taken from Kuwait during its 1990-91 occupation.[8]

Iraq also has been offering favourable economic terms to countries like Syria, and Jordan, both of which now heavily depend on exchanges with Iraq.[9] In addition, and in an effort to rally popular support throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds, the regime has been highlighting its financial assistance to the Palestinian uprising (including payments to those killed during the confrontation and higher payments to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers) and is alleged to be donating oil coupons – resaleable on the international market – to Arab intellectuals and politicians who defend its cause.[10] The efficacy of this kind of diplomacy is debatable. What is less so is that it demonstrates Baghdad's determination to avoid a confrontation that it knows may be its last.

Simultaneously, the regime has taken steps to consolidate its domestic position and co-opt important constituencies.

1. *Locking down key areas*. Beneath the surface calm that prevails in Baghdad, the regime is seeking to minimise the risk of disturbances in historically vulnerable areas. This is particularly the case in the South, where military governors known for their harsh methods and answering solely to Qusay, the President's younger son and putative successor, [11] have replaced civilian governors. Military units have been moved to cities, where U.S. forces are viewed as most vulnerable both because of the difficulties of urban warfare and because of the high political cost of civilian casualties. Surveillance by the central state is omnipresent, and the internal security plan that was put in place in anticipation of Operation Desert Fox, launched by the U.S. and UK in 1998,[12] once again is in effect. Iraqi territory has been subdivided into four security zones managed by super-prefects in coordination with local Baath Party officials and tribal leaders. Whereas the regime once emphasised protection of its border with the autonomous Kurdish region in the North, today it is giving priority to the South and in particular to Basra and the marsh areas, where it has strengthened its military presence. Likewise, a security belt surrounds Baghdad, where the most loyal troops (the Special Republican Guards) are stationed.[13]

2. *Playing on religious divides*. The regime has adopted a dual attitude vis-à-vis the Sunni-Shia division.[14] On the one hand, it is playing on the fears of various religious minorities (Sunni but also

[6] See *Le Monde*, 17 September 2002; *The Washington Post*, 30 September 2002.

[7] See "L'Irak se réconcilie avec le Koweït et cherche des protections face à la menace américaine", *Le Monde*, 30 March 2002.

[8] On the stepping up of trade relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, see Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU): *Country Report. Saudi Arabia*, November 2002, p. 30.

[9] Since late 2000, over 150,000 barrels a day of Iraqi crude oil have been pumped through the Banias pipeline and sold to Syria at a significant discount, thus freeing up more of Syria's own oil for export. See EIU: *Country Profile Syria 2002-2003*, pp.33-34**.** Under a post-Gulf War special oil agreement, Iraq supplies Jordan with its entire oil needs at a price below the market rate in return for goods. Iraq recently provided Jordan with a grant of U.S.$300 million to help it finance its oil bill. See "Trade volume to be increased to $310m by 2003", *Jordan Times*, 22-23 November 2002.

[10] Pursuant to this practice, a certain quantity of oil is given to individuals who can then resell it to international companies or businessmen. The practice is at the origin of several financial scandals, principally in Egypt and Lebanon. See *Al-Hayat*, 5 May 2002, 6 October 2002.

[11] See O. Bengio: "A Republican Turning Royalist? Saddam Husayn and the Dilemmas of Succession", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 35 (4), pp. 641-653.

[12] In December 1998, Richard Butler, the Chairman of the UN Special Commission for the Disarmament of Iraq (UNSCOM), complained of Iraqi obstruction and withdrew his staff from the country in anticipation of a military response from the U.S. and the UK. A day after Butler informed the UN that Iraq was impeding UNSCOM's efforts, Washington and London launched Operation Desert Fox, a four-day military campaign that targeted alleged WMD and command-and-control facilities throughout southern and central Iraq.

[13] These troops, who are recruited almost exclusively on a tribal basis, are charged with the defence of critical infrastructure. Saddam's personal protection is provided by the "*himaya*", a praetorian guard comprising family members. See Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report: Iraq*, September 2002, pp. 11-13; Kenneth Pollack, *The Threatening Storm*, pp. 115-122 (New York, 2002); ICG Middle East Report No. 6, *Iraq Backgrounder: What Lies Beneath*, 1 October 2002, pp. 10-13.

[14] On this division, see ICG Report, *Iraq Backgrounder*, op. cit.

Christian) that a post-Saddam regime will be dominated by Shiites. As one official explained, "What are we supposed to do? The West, to whom we have been so helpful in the past in fighting Islamic fundamentalism [during the war with Iran, 1980-1988], has given up on us, and religious fundamentalists accuse us of being apostates. Perhaps Iraq's future will be in the hands of the Shiites".[15] On the other hand, the regime has been seeking in various ways to placate the Shiites. In October, high level Shiite figures from Najaf (including Ayatollah Al-Sistani) issued a religious edict, or *fatwa*, proclaiming that any alliance with non-Muslims to fight other Muslims is contrary to Islam and, therefore, strictly prohibited.[16] The regime also is making use of Shiite symbolism to bolster Saddam Hussein's credentials. The image of Saddam flanked by his two "young lions", Uday and Qusay, aims to mirror the Shiite holy trilogy of Imam Ali flanked by his two sons, Hassan and Hussein.

3. *Appeasing and co-opting the Iraqi people*. As the threat of an externally-driven attempt to overthrow it becomes clearer, the regime has sought to buy off the population or at least the middle class, which has seen its fortunes evaporate under the sanctions regime. *Tarhib*, or terrorising, is giving way to *targhib*, or wooing. Public services have registered notable improvements, particularly in Baghdad, whether in terms of transportation, water or electricity. Baghdad increasingly is taking on the appearance of a vast construction area, with an impressive number of new lodgings.[17] Aided both by the significant increase in revenue resulting from illicit oil exports (i.e., oil sales that fall outside the "oil-for-food" program[18]) and by the massive printing of currency,[19] the regime has injected a considerable amount of liquidity into the market. This has enabled it to raise the salaries of government officials (in particular of school teachers) – though there is still a long way to go to make up for the hyper-inflation of the 1990s and the dinar's collapse vis à vis the U.S. dollar.[20] The state has issued new banknotes, and 10,000 dinar bills (equivalent to roughly five U.S. dollars) are now available, in part to use as a means of buying the loyalty of high-level military and Baath Party officials. Using funds generated by the oil-for-food program, the regime has imported thousands of new cars that it resells at affordable prices to members of the country's elite.

Improvements also have taken place in the daily lives of middle class Iraqis. So far the most popular measure appears to have been the October 2002 cancellation of the exit fee. Since 1996, Iraqis had had to pay the equivalent of U.S.$200 to travel out of the country – a prohibitive amount for the vast majority of the population.[21] Likewise, the regime has reduced various fees and taxes affecting businesses and targeted the middle class by increasing subsidies affecting certain consumer goods (cars, computers and the like).[22] Iraqis now have access to a selection of satellite television channels, both Arab and European, albeit typically those geared toward entertainment as opposed to news. Even access to the Internet has expanded, though the regime strictly filters what is available, often leaving little but e-mail communication.

---

[15] ICG interview, Baghdad, September-October 2002.

[16] See *Al-Iraq* (official newspaper, Baghdad), 1 October 2002. This almost certainly was in response to more permissive *fatwas* currently circulating among the Shiite community outside Iraq. Thus, in the Iranian Holy city of Qom, Ayatollah Al Shirazi decreed that efforts to free Iraq from oppression were legitimate. *Al-Watan* (Kuwait), 27 September 2002. In Lebanon, Hizbollah's Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Hizbullah's spiritual guide, has authorised cooperation between Islamist and secular currents within the Iraqi opposition. See *Al-Mutamar*, 22 August 2002.

[17] See Statement by Benon Sevan, Executive Director of the Office of the Iraqi Program, at the Informal Consultations of the Security Council, 29 May 2002. www.un.org/Depts/oip.

[18] Since 1997, revenues derived from smuggling of heavily discounted oil to neighbouring states have amounted to roughly U.S.$ 2 billion per year. See S. Graham-Brown and C. Toensing, "Why Another war? A Backgrounder on the Iraq Crisis", MERIP, October 2002, p. 9 (available at www.merip.org).

[19] For over a decade, Iraq has consistently monetised its fiscal deficits. Because the tax system remains underdeveloped, and because it has no independent source of revenue other than the illicit sale of oil, the regime has tended to print money as a way of covering its various expenses. See Economist Intelligence Unit, *Iraq*, op cit., note 8, p. 25.

[20] The value of the Iraqi dinar has tended to fluctuate with expectations regarding the likelihood of a U.S. attack. Predictably, it plunges whenever war-talk intensifies in Washington. Officially, the exchange rate is 0.311 Iraqi dinars for one U.S. dollar. On the black market, the dollar trades for as much as 2,000 dinars. See Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report: Iraq*, November 2002, p. 4.

[21] See also Rory McCarthy, "Saddam woos cowed population", *The Guardian*, 28 October 2002.

[22] The effectiveness of these measures is questionable. As one university professor – who had just been offered a free computer – told ICG, "These are pathetic measures designed to create the illusion of normalcy and of a forthcoming improvement in our daily lives". ICG interview, Baghdad, September-October 2002.

The regime's efforts at rehabilitation culminated in the October referendum, during which 100 per cent of the electorate purportedly approved a seven-year extension of Saddam Hussein's presidency.[23] Saddam's personality cult is as widespread and intense as ever. During the campaign preceding the referendum, official slogans stressed that only he can ensure the country's safety, territorial integrity and independence. As on past occasions, representatives from many social and professional groups (including doctors, lawyers and engineers) were recruited to demonstrate their support for Saddam on television. So, too, were various tribal leaders, who pledged their allegiance (*bay'a*), as well as that of their tribe, to the President.[24]

The referendum was followed by a series of measures designed to demonstrate the President's gratitude and magnanimity.[25] The regime announced that it would allow students who fail their annual exams to return to their studies as a symbol of "the reward of the President to his loyal people".[26] The most spectacular measure was a "general, comprehensive and final amnesty" decreed by the Revolutionary Command Council and purportedly applying to all Iraqis sentenced to imprisonment (including those living in exile) except for those convicted of "the crimes of spying for the Zionist entity and United States," murderers not forgiven by the families of their victims and Iraqis who had unpaid financial debts to the state.[27] The amnesty officially was decreed "in gratitude for [Saddam's] 100 per cent victory", and the state-controlled media explained that it "signals a new stage in the life of all Iraqis", who were called upon to "join the beloved homeland and its march toward construction, prosperity and progress" and to "consolidate the cohesion of the internal front against all forces hostile to Iraq".[28] Information concerning how many prisoners were released and who they were is extremely unreliable. According to exiled Iraqi opposition members, over 100,000 prisoners were released, while some 40,000 political detainees remain incarcerated.[29] It was also claimed that most of those freed were either petty criminals or non-Iraqi Arabs (principally Jordanians). The focus of attention was on the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, a large compound some 30 kilometres west of Baghdad, but

[23] Few Iraqis appeared to take the referendum seriously. Heavy pressure exerted by Baath Party members to get out the vote, the absence of private polling booths and of envelopes in which to conceal one's ballot, and the presence of *hizbiyyin* (Baath Party members) at polling stations to verify that people voted "yes" all contributed to the farcical result. Moreover, it is useful to recall that, in 1995, Iraqis who somehow mistakenly voted "no" were either given another ballot, threatened, or molested.

[24] Pacts of allegiance between Saddam and tribal chiefs allied with the regime (*shuyukh hukuma*) were a staple of the 1990s and have typically been publicised by the official media. Once branded by the Baath as retrograde agents of the old regime, these tribal chiefs have been thoroughly rehabilitated and rewarded both politically and materially. Indeed, they have become very useful police auxiliaries, ensuring law and order in rural areas, taking steps against border infiltration and providing the regime with a semblance of legitimacy. The very nature of the tribal system, a universe of shifting alliances, makes it an ideal target of the state's manipulation. See A. Baram, "Neo-tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Tribal Policies 1991-1996", IJMES 29 (1997), pp. 1-31; and J. Yaphe, "Tribalism in Iraq, the Old and the New", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. VII, No. 3, June 2000, pp. 51-58. Use of the tribal card in Iraq hardly is something new. The Ottomans introduced it, and the British perpetuated it. Despite the modernisation of Iraqi society after the 1958 revolution, tribal structures survived, particularly in rural areas. The Baath party's disrepute, especially after the 1991 uprisings, has made tribal loyalties more valuable for the regime.

[25] In a speech after the referendum, Saddam stated "I shall not close the door of forgiveness before any sincere penitence to Allah and any willingness to renounce everything harmful" Quoted in Michael Slackman, "Saddam doling out rewards", *Los Angeles Times*, 27 October 2002.

[26] See *Al Iraq* (official newspaper), 26 October 2002. See also Slackman, "Saddam doling out rewards", op. cit., and McCarthy, "Saddam woos cowed population" op. cit.

[27] Iraqi television, cited by BBC, 20 October 2002, 26 October 2002. A nationally televised statement from the Revolutionary Command Council said the amnesty included "prisoners, detainees and fugitives, including those under sentence of death, inside or outside Iraq". Cited by BBC, 20 October 2002.

[28] Ibid. It should be noted that the practice in itself is not unprecedented. The Revolutionary Command Council has issued amnesties of various sorts in Baathist Iraq, usually to reduce pressures on the regime.

[29] ICG interview with Iraqi opposition members, Paris, November 2002. Reportedly approximately 20,000 detainees were released. John Burns, "Fear of Saddam Hussein may be yielding to doubt", *The New York Times*, 27 October 2002. Earlier the same journalist had reported that "figures of 100,000, possibly as many as 150,000, might not be exaggerated". Burns, "Hussein and mobs virtually empty Iraq's prisons", *The New York Times*, 12 October 2002. The amnesty apparently did not apply to several thousand members of the Barzani tribe arrested in 1983; an estimated 100,000 Kurds arrested during the Anfal campaign in 1988; and a number of Kuwaiti citizens arrested in 1990-1991. The assumption is that most of them have been executed.

prisoners also were released in Basra, Mosul and Kirkuk.[30]

4. *Dangling the prospect of political liberalisation.* The regime is openly appealing to "authentic patriots" among the current opposition and reportedly is engaged in secret talks with some of its exiled members. Vice-President Tariq Aziz raised this possibility on several of his foreign trips, and rumours ensued regarding names of potential recruits for a future "national coalition government" aimed at achieving "democratic transformation in Iraq". Subsequently, an opposition group in exile led by Abdul Jabbar al-Kubeisi – a dissident Baathist living in Damascus – returned to Iraq to hold a series of meetings with officials. The group is essentially composed of Arab nationalists and former Baathists and seeks to reform the system rather than overthrow it.[31] Discussions reportedly are focused on the drafting of a new, more liberal constitution. Some Kurds also are speculating that the regime might propose negotiations on a future federal status as a way of neutralising their opposition.[32]

This is not the first time that the regime has sought to project a more moderate image in the face of external threats. In the aftermath of the collapse of the popular uprisings in 1991, it announced the establishment of a multi-party system, freedom of the press and a new constitution. The new government was led by Saadoun Hammadi, a Shiite enjoying the reputation of being a moderate and a competent economist. The opening lasted only a few months, until Saddam assumed the office of Prime Minister himself.

III. IRAQI VOICES

By far the most surprising development noted by ICG is the increased willingness of ordinary Iraqis to speak in relatively open terms on issues ranging from their views of the Iraqi regime to their feelings about a possible U.S.-led war. Interpreting what this means is a complex matter. The overall impression as perceived by ICG was one of exasperation and even anger after twelve years of uncertainty and international isolation and even more years of warfare, combined with a growing sense that the current regime's days are numbered.

1. *An overwhelming aspiration to normalcy*. Perhaps the most widespread wish expressed to ICG was that Iraq finally turn the page of its Iranian and Kuwaiti wars and of its confrontation with the outside world. Many of the Iraqis interviewed by ICG shared the view of having been mere pawns who have paid for the follies of others. A typical sentiment was:

> What we want is simply a dose of stability. We have suffered enough due to our leaders' mistakes. We want to become a normal country once again, a state that enjoys good relations with its neighbours and that is no longer an international pariah.[33]

Increasingly nostalgic recollections of an earlier era of economic prosperity and modernisation reinforce feelings of collective humiliation and national disgrace. "Before the war and the sanctions, our dinar was strong and our purchasing power was the envy of the Arab world. We want to return to the period of prosperity our parents lived through in the 1970s."[34]

2. *A reliance on the outside*. For many Iraqis interviewed by ICG, returning to normalcy today requires yielding to a foreign power. Memories of the failed 1991 uprising and its bloody consequences remain vivid, and few appear ready to take up arms

[30] The regime's strategy may well have backfired, as a number of angry Iraqis whose family members were not released (most probably because they had been executed or because they remain in secret underground prisons) led unprecedented demonstrations demanding information about their relatives. Whether the demonstrations were organised and how significant they were remains unknown. See, e.g., Cameron Barr, "In Iraq, a rare chance to be heard", *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 October 2002. One possible (and partial) explanation for the regime's decision is that the significant detainee population represented a burden, in terms of both surveillance and nourishment. Indeed, both delinquency and military desertions (punishable by jail) rose rapidly in the 1990s, largely as a result of the sharp decline in living standards. The amnesty also may have had something to do with rampant corruption which has thoroughly discredited the justice system among the Iraqi people. Court rulings and sentencing often are the object of financial transactions and, with the exception of political prisoners, detainees who have the means of buying off judges or prison officials generally can escape imprisonment.

[31] See *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 23 November 2002. For a description of the Iraqi opposition, see ICG Report, *Iraq Backgrounder*, op. cit., pp. 21-37.

[32] See Chris Kutschera, "The Kurds' Secret Scenarios", Merip Report 225 (Winter 2002), p. 15.

[33] Comment made during ICG interviews with Iraqi students, Mosul University, September-October 2002.

[34] ICG interview with Iraqi student at Mosul University, October 2002.

against the regime. Not many seem to take very seriously the claim that the United States is motivated primarily by the desire to disarm the regime; most consider this a pretext concealing a naked power struggle between Saddam and President Bush over regime-change. Still, in order to end the era of sanctions and international isolation, many of those Iraqis appear ready to accept almost any alternative to the status quo, and foreign intervention currently is viewed as the most realistic way of achieving that goal. Iraqis told ICG of having put their plans on hold until "the day after", including important purchases, administrative demarches, and the pursuit of higher education. One mother explained that she had postponed a long-scheduled trip to visit her sons in the U.S. on the expectation that, soon, they would be in a position to visit her.[35]

In this respect, hostility to foreign intervention in Iraq based on Arab nationalist feelings appears far more potent within the wider Arab world than in Iraq itself. In the words of a student, the feeling of belonging to a nation has lost much of its meaning as "nobody believes in this country any more. Everyone wants to either leave it, forget it, or change identity and begin a new life".[36]

3. *An expectant attitude towards a U.S.-led war*. This overall perception translates into a complex attitude toward the prospect of a U.S.-led war. The concern is not so much with the fighting itself – about which some Iraqis interviewed by ICG appear to have developed all sorts of imaginary scenarios, including the use of mysterious bombs that will anaesthetise their soldiers without causing any human or material damage – as with its aftermath. Many of the Iraqis who were interviewed appear confident and hopeful that the outside world (and particularly the United States) will make a significant and long-term commitment to facilitate the political transition, help rebuild the country and ensure its prompt reintegration into the international community.

As one Iraqi put it:

> We do not particularly want a U.S. military strike, but we do want a political change. We are even ready to live under international tutelage. We have nothing to lose, and it cannot be any worse than our current condition. Look at the Gulf countries: their regimes are as subservient to the Americans as can be, and yet their people are faring far better than we are![37]

A heavy and prolonged international – and, especially, U.S. – presence is both anticipated and desired as an insurance policy against civil strife and instability and as a guarantor of massive international aid. Expressing a view voiced by a number of Iraqis, a civil servant explained:

> If the Americans are committed to overthrowing the regime they also must be committed to rebuilding a country they directly contributed to destroy over the past twelve years as a result of their uncompromising attitude toward sanctions, disarmament and the various other pretexts they invoked. If Iraq's reconstruction does not become a priority, then it would be better to stick to the status quo. At least Saddam knows us well, and he knows how to manage the violent tendencies of our society. The United States must guarantee law and order, and they must oversee Iraq's rapid reconstruction.[38]

4. *Anticipation of manageable internal conflict in post-Saddam Iraq.* Younger Iraqis interviewed by ICG, who have known only war and the militarisation of society, appear more prone to view any violence that will follow regime change as redemptive, a necessary and temporary phase. Among older Iraqis, memories of the political violence and score settling that existed prior to the consolidation of the Baathist regime in the late 1960s

[35] ICG interviews, Baghdad, September-October 2002. One of the most striking aspects of the statements was that they took place in public settings, such as a beauty parlour.

[36] ICG interview with Iraqi student, Baghdad, September-October 2002. As Jean-Pierre Luizard, a French expert on Iraq, explained: "People have a strong feeling that they are not in control of their own destiny. The crucial decisions are made elsewhere, and society has ceased to play the leading role in its own destiny". *Le Monde*, 17 October 2002. In this respect, some Iraqis made the point that even in 1991, participants in the insurrection against the regime were prepared to rely on the forces of the international coalition and had sought their support in vain. See Najib al-Salihi, *Al-Zilzal. Ma hadatha fi-l'Iraq ba'd al-insihab min al-Kuwait?* [The Earthquake: What happened in Iraq after the withdrawal from Kuwait?], (London, Al-Rafid, 1998).

[37] ICG interview with young Iraqi architect, Baghdad, September-October 2002.

[38] ICG interview with Iraqi civil servant, Baghdad, September-October 2002.

remain fresh. However, even in their case concern about violence is mitigated by the belief that tribal structures will limit acts of bloodshed and retribution. Indeed, as explained by Iraqis interviewed by ICG, persons associated with the Baathist regime are likely to seek refuge behind tribal protection and invoke tribal codes, defiance of which could prompt collective retribution. A function of the collapse and corruption of the central justice system and of the recent strengthening of tribal structures, the widespread enforcement of customary tribal law (*al-'urf al-'asha'iri*) in inter-personal disputes is now endemic throughout the country, including Baghdad. "The public interest no longer exists" complained one Iraqi. "Prosecutors no longer seek to enforce the law once the suspect has been absolved by the tribe, for example as a result of inter-family arbitration".[39] At times bemoaned as evidence of the gradual privatisation of the justice system, the expansion of tribal law is seen by some as a guarantor of moderation in a post-regime scenario.[40]

Moreover, the scope of the population's complicity with the Baathist regime in one form or another, in particular among Iraq's intellectual and economic elites, is seen as another source of post-regime change moderation. This complicity takes the form not only of collaboration with the security apparatus[41] but also of cooperation with the regime's cultural or economic system in exchange for material benefits. Regardless of their views toward the regime, intellectuals, scholars and journalists cannot operate outside its institutions, and those who want to engage in business must interact with persons close to the circles of power. Respondents opined that since so many Iraqis were associated with the regime, self-preservation would insure against wide-scale vendettas and acts of revenge. In short, the certainty that some degree of violence necessarily will accompany the regime's collapse seems balanced by the belief that such violence will not develop into sustained civil strife, let alone a civil war. In the words of one Iraqi:

> Contrary to what outsiders think, Iraq will not become another Lebanon. People will not be killed because their identity cards specify that they are Arab, or Kurd, Moslem or Christian, Shiite or Sunni. We are perfectly aware of who tortured and who murdered, and when the moment comes, we will know how to make distinctions and punish only those directly responsible. Acts of vengeance are inevitable, as they were in 1991. But even then, the wrath of the people was directed against representatives of the regime, regardless of their religion. Most of the Baath party leaders who were killed in the course of the southern uprising were Shiites who had repressed other Shiites. It is the regime that sought to give the struggle a religious dimension.[42]

For many Iraqis, the more pertinent conflicts in the future are likely to be based either on conflicts within and between heavily armed tribes or on socio-economic cleavages that have been exacerbated by a decade of sanctions. As to the former, there is evidence that tribal contests for the appropriation of rank and influence (e.g., intra-tribal disputes over shaykhdom positions) or for the appropriation of goods (e.g. inter-tribal disputes over the allocation of water resources) have intensified and at times

[39] ICG interview with Baghdad lawyer, September-October 2002.

[40] As one Iraqi explained, "the regime has strengthened the tribes. It has given them an 'eye'" (translation of the Iraqi expression *atahum ayn*, which means to speak from a position of power and prestige). ICG interview with University professor, Baghdad, September-October 2002. The privatisation of the justice system is managed by tribal chiefs who enforce *fasl*, or tribal arbitration, as follows: each of the two opposing parties is represented by an elderly and respected member of his or her tribe during a meeting the outcome of which is binding on all. Punishment often takes the form of monetary compensation. The growing role of tribal mores has had other effects as well. Tribal customs have penetrated urban centres, and women typically are their victims. Examples include pressure for marriage at a young age, the re-emergence of polygamy, and the resurgence of stricter rules regarding clothing. ICG interview with university professor in Baghdad, September-October 2002 This has led some analysts to worry that a post-Saddam regime, which would be even more reliant on tribal structures, would undo many of the efforts at modernising society that were undertaken by the Baath regime. ICG interview with Lebanese academic, Beirut, November 2002. This fear of re-tribalisation is not unanimously shared, however. Some Arab analysts – especially among those disillusioned with the performance of the "modern" nation-state in the Arab world in general and in Iraq in particular – view tribes as social institutions that potentially can represent and protect individuals and mediate between them and the central government.

[41] According to Kenneth Pollack, "Iraqis themselves believe that . . . 2 million to 4 million people serve as informants of the security services", Pollack, op. cit., p. 117. Baathist Iraq has modelled itself on East Germany, where the security services (the *Stasi*), were virtually omnipresent.

[42] ICG interview with a retired teacher, Baghdad, Saddam City, September-October 2002.

become violent.[43] As to the latter, the sanctions severely hit members of the salaried middle class, whose income was massively eroded by hyper-inflation, at the same time as they promoted the rise of a (much smaller) class of newly rich, who took advantage of a budding informal economy based on contraband. Specifically, the sanctions reversed the balance between the better-educated and state-employed urban groups on the one hand, and rural groups on the other. During the 1990s, rural Iraqis witnessed relative material improvement because the state no longer compelled them to sell their crops at an artificially low price. Being able to sell at market prices allowed a number of them to amass substantial incomes. City dwellers often take aim at the "illiterate and bare-footed millionaires" from the countryside who have been building lavish villas in the heart of the cities. [44] More broadly, the 1990s have widened income and wealth disparities in Iraq.[45]

That said, members of the Sunni and, especially, Christian communities expressed concern that a regime change triggered from the outside could result in a loss of status and perhaps worse at the hands of the majority Shiite population.[46] But virtually none of these respondents mentioned alarming scenarios of sectarian warfare, and they, too, seemed resigned to the prospect that an outside intervention was around the corner.

5. *Hostility toward the opposition in exile*. Most Iraqis interviewed by ICG appeared to converge in their fear of, and lack of respect for, the opposition in exile. Iraqis interviewed by ICG often drew a distinction between what they consider to be the "historic" opposition (i.e., groups with genuine roots in the country) such as the Communists, Kurds and some Islamists, and what they dubbed the "phoney" opposition, which was born in the aftermath of the Gulf War and includes the Iraqi National Congress, Iraqi National Accord and the Iraqi Free Officers. Such distinctions aside, the general feeling was that:

> The exiled Iraqis are the exact replica of those who currently govern us . . . with the sole difference that the latter are already satiated since they have been robbing us for the past 30 years. Those who will be accompanying the American troops will be ravenous.[47]

6. *A lack of interest in Iraq's future political make-up*. Interviews conducted by ICG suggest that few Iraqis have given much thought to a post-Saddam Iraq, relying instead on abstract notions of a better future. Indeed, debates about the structure of a post-Saddam regime are far more intense outside than inside Iraq. Decades of authoritarian rule, the systematic destruction of civil society and more recent economic hardships have led to a general de-politicisation of the population.[48] The political struggles that once characterised Iraq and that reflected its considerable social, cultural, ideological and religious diversity are a thing of the past. Independent social and political structures have been shattered, a phenomenon that, along with the weakening of the central state, has led to the reinforcement of "communal" allegiances – based on family, neighbourhood, faith, or ethnicity – as the purveyors of identity and guarantors of personal safety. But none of these group loyalties can provide a genuine and sustained means of political mobilisation. Referring to the absence of any independent indigenous structure capable of mobilising the Iraqi people or of channelling their unhappiness toward the regime, one intellectual explained: "we have become political dwarfs".[49] Even the Shiite religious institution in Nadjaf (*al-Hawza al-'ilmiyya*) is only a shadow of its former self, a victim of the regime's repression. Since the 1999 assassination of Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Al-Sadr,[50] it has lacked a charismatic leader and attracts only a small number of students – many of whom are suspected of being government agents.

As a result, the future political order and the shape of the constitution are considered second-order

[43] ICG interview with a merchant in Mosul, September-October 2002.
[44] ICG interviews in Baghdad and Mosul, September-October 2002.
[45] See *Taqrir al-tanmiyyah al-bashariyyah fi-l Iraq* (Report on Human Development), UNDP, Baghdad, 2001, p. 21. Of course, while these inequities do not strictly match up with the Sunnite/Shiite divide, they risk being invoked and manipulated to fuel religious tensions.
[46] ICG interviews in Sunni quarters of Baghdad (*Al-A'dhamiyya*, *Al- Mansour*), September-October 2002; "L'inquiétude des Chrétiens", *Le Monde*, 1 November 2002.
[47] ICG interview with a civil servant, Baghdad, September-October 2002.
[48] "The embargo economy, selective penury, within a society resigned to terror in which the state is omnipotent, explains why an apolitical stance has become far and away the predominant one in Iraq". Luizard, op. cit.
[49] ICG interview with Iraqi intellectual, Baghdad, September-October 2002.
[50] See ICG Report, *Iraq Backgrounder*, op. cit., p.15.

questions, if they are considered at all. The priority is to improve daily lives:

> The people will be mobilised by hunger and need. In the event change were to occur, Iraqis will judge the situation based on one criterion: whether they will have something to eat. The rest, politics, the nature of the successor regime, the choice of leaders, all that is of minor importance.[51]

People voiced this feeling by using a frequently heard expression: "Let Saddam make trouble, let Bush hit us, but let us keep our street stalls".[52]

The Kurdish question in particular, which is the focus of so much attention in the international community, appeared marginal to Arab Iraqis interviewed in Baghdad. After all, from their perspective, the various regimes that have governed Iraq since the advent of the modern state in 1921 have lived in a situation of endemic warfare in Kurdistan, and not one has fallen as a result of its management of the Kurdish issue. In their eyes, the more salient issue for the future of the Iraqi state is the balance between its two principal Arab communities, Shiites and Sunnis. If the idea of federalism is understood at all, it is soundly rejected by Shiites and Sunnis alike, who view the 1970 Agreement granting Kurds self-rule and cultural and linguistic rights as both appropriate and sufficient. Whether Iraqi Arabs will be prepared to accept a federal constitution in the context of a post-Saddam regime is likely to emerge as one of the more difficult challenges.[53]

IV. CONCLUSION: TO END A STATE OF WAR

Central but as yet passive figures in the unfolding drama, the Iraqi people appear eager for some way, any way, to alter the status quo. ICG's limited survey suggests that many Iraqis are willing to embrace a U.S.-led war if only because it is emerging as the most probable, immediate and dependable scenario for change. The notion of massive resistance to such an invasion put up by Iraqis seems off the mark – though, of course, fierce fighting by loyalist troops, particularly among the Special Republican Guards, cannot be ruled out. In short, there appears to be a wide discrepancy between the views expressed by Iraqis and by the rest of the Arab world where feelings of hostility toward U.S. policy regarding Iraq, and toward the U.S. itself, run deep.

Drawing conclusions about the longer-term implications of a confrontation with Iraq is, of course, a different matter altogether.

- Even in the event of a significant "further material breach" under UN Security Council Resolution 1441 being established, the costs and potential benefits of military intervention will still have to be carefully calculated with an eye both to the wider Middle East and the UN's credibility, as well as to the impact within Iraq itself. Although the desires of Iraqi citizens are important, today the security of the region hangs in the balance, and popular sentiment in the Arab world is leaning heavily against a U.S.-led war whose motives it questions. American diplomats privately acknowledge that the situation is, in this regard, worse than it has been for as long as they can recall, and recent acts of violence targeting Americans in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait provide sobering evidence of this.[54] Arab officials have other long-term worries about a U.S.-led war, including a fuelling of regional instability, strengthening of Islamic radicalism, especially among Sunnis, and a recruiting bonanza for al-Qaeda.[55]

[51] ICG interview with a journalist, Baghdad, September-October 2002.

[52] The overall impression is confirmed by this remark by a former left-wing and anti-American Iraqi activist: "With Saddam, we have both the dictatorship and dependence. Even if we remain under supervision, at least a war will enable us to end the dictatorship". Quoted by Jean-Pierre Luizard, *Le Monde*, "Le régime irakien n'a aucune base sociale, il s'effondrera facilement en cas de guerre", 17 October 2002.

[53] A member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, one of the two principal Kurdish parties, asserted: "I will never put the federal issue on a referendum. I will not discuss it with the Arabs! The Shias support us, until now. But if they seize power, I do not know." Quoted in Kutschera, op. cit., p. 21.

[54] ICG interviews with U.S. diplomats, Amman and Beirut, November 2002.

[55] ICG interview with senior Lebanese official, Beirut, November 2002; ICG interview with Egyptian official, Washington, D.C., November 2002. Commenting about a possible war with Iraq, Daniel Benjamin, a former staff

- The Iraqi people's de-politicisation and the lack of any independent centre of power should be taken as potential warning signs about the future. First, they suggest that Iraqis' anticipation about the relative calm that will prevail in the aftermath of a forcible intervention and regime change is more impression than informed judgement, based in part on their assumption of a relatively bloodless invasion and heavy international presence. They also suggest that presently suppressed feelings – Iraqi nationalism in particular – may yet come to the fore once the situation has changed. More importantly, they suggest that should such a heavy international presence not be forthcoming, Iraqi society – drained over the years of any independent civil structure – will be vulnerable both to domestic groups and external actors vying for influence and a share of the nation's resources. Certainly, the interviews conducted by ICG would indicate that the exiled opposition will be no substitute for a heavy foreign presence and that designating a government in exile is unlikely to be conducive to Iraq's long-term stability.
- Perhaps most importantly, while Iraqis' attitudes toward a U.S. invasion currently are shaped in reference to a situation they abhor, tomorrow they will be shaped in reference to the expectations they have formed. And expectations regarding what a multinational intervention would mean – in terms of economic and political assistance, as well as in terms of the length and scope of involvement – at times appear to be wildly inflated. Based on his experience in Somalia and commenting on the prospect of a U.S.-led invasion, retired U.S. Marine General Anthony Zinni explained:

> I think that, again depending on how this goes, if it's short with minimal destruction, there will be the initial euphoria of change. It's always what comes next that is tough. The initial euphoria can wear off. People have the idea that Jeffersonian democracy, entrepreneurial economics and all these great things are going to come. If they are not delivered immediately, do not seem to be on the rise, and worse yet, if the situation begins to deteriorate if there is tribal revenge, factional splitting, still violent elements in the country making statements that make it more difficult, institutions that are difficult to re- establish, infrastructure damage, I think that initial euphoria could wane away. It's not whether you're greeted in the streets as a hero; it's whether you're still greeted as a hero when you come back a year from now.[56]

A strong external presence able to rebuild Iraq both politically and economically therefore appears essential in order to avoid domestic instability and strife. However, the dilemma is that the heavier and the more prolonged the presence, the more likely it is to become at some point the target of militant groups both within Iraq and throughout the region at large. As more than one Arab interlocutor pointedly reminded ICG, a number of Lebanese in the South of the country initially welcomed the Israeli army when it invaded Lebanon in 1982 as a means of ending years of bloodshed and instability, only to rapidly turn against it.[57] The concern, in other words, is less about the "day of" than about the day after, and the day after that.

In the end, what comes to light is the picture of a population worn down by what it has been forced to endure and eager for deliverance. This is a message that ought to be heeded, regardless of whether the inspections succeed, and regardless of whether a U.S.-led war is the final outcome. As this briefing paper has tried to show, the status quo of harsh international sanctions coupled with ruthless domestic repression is experienced as a prolonged state of war that – from the Iraqi people's perspective – no longer is sustainable. Today, policy-makers are focused on developing scenarios for Iraq assuming the U.S. wages a war. But they also should be considering creative and forward-looking scenarios for Iraq assuming it does not.

---

member of the U.S. National Security Council and an expert on al-Qaeda, wrote: «[T]he greatest danger will likely come . . . from the fact that [Saddam's] removal would present jihadists with rich new opportunities," including galvanising new recruits and targeting American forces in a post-Saddam Iraq. Daniel Benjamin, "In the Fog of War, a Greater Threat", *The Washington Post*, 31 October 2002.

[56] Remarks delivered at a Middle East Institute Conference, Washington, D.C., 10 October 2002.

[57] ICG interviews with Lebanese journalists and political activists, Beirut, November 2002. General Zinni made the same comment with regard to Somalia; see footnote 57 above. For a discussion of the initial Shiite reaction to Israeli troops in 1982, which was then followed by strong Shiite resistance, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a - Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, 1987), p. 117; and Andreas Rieck, *Die Shiiten und der Kampf um den Libanon* (Hamburg, 1989), pp. 404-407.

Ultimately, the views candidly expressed by Iraqis – and the very fact of the candour itself – may say less about their feelings regarding a war and its aftermath than about the appalling two decades that, should a war now occur, have preceded it. They reflect a sense of desperation about the present more than of pragmatic, level-headed hope about the future. For if there is one clear, incontrovertible conclusion that emerges, it is that the time is long overdue for Iraq's state of war finally, and one way or another, to come to an end.

Amman/Brussels, 4 December 2002

APPENDIX A

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 80 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, *www.crisisweb.org*. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York and Paris and a media liaison office in London. The organisation currently operates eleven field offices (in Amman, Belgrade, Bogotá, Islamabad, Jakarta, Nairobi, Osh, Pristina, Sarajevo, Sierra Leone and Skopje) with analysts working in nearly 30 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents.

In *Africa*, those countries include Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone-Liberia-Guinea, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe; in *Asia*, Indonesia, Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kashmir; in *Europe*, Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia; in the *Middle East*, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in *Latin America*, Colombia.

ICG raises funds from governments, charitable foundations, companies and individual donors. The following governments currently provide funding: Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Foundation and private sector donors include The Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The John Merck Fund, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Open Society Institute, Ploughshares Fund, The Ruben & Elisabeth Rausing Trust, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and the United States Institute of Peace.

December 2002

APPENDIX B

ICG BOARD MEMBERS

International Crisis Group

International Headquarters
149 Avenue Louise, 1050 Brussels, Belgium · Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 · Fax: +32 2 502 50 38
E-mail: icgbrussels@crisisweb.org

New York Office
400 Madison Avenue, Suite 11C, New York 10017 · Tel: +1 212 813 08 20 · Fax: +1 212 813 08 25
E-mail: icgny@crisisweb.org

Washington Office
1629 K Street, Suite 450, Washington DC 20006 · Tel +1 202 785 1601 · Fax: +1 202 785 1630
E-mail: icgwashington@crisisweb.org

Paris Office
51 Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 75001 Paris, France · Tel: +33 1 44 88 60 20 · Fax: +33 1 44 88 24 26
E-mail: icgparis@crisisweb.org

All ICG reports are available on our website: www.crisisweb.org