

BAGHDAD ON THE BRINK OF DESTRUCTION

by William R. Polk

First impressions of Baghdad are the same one gets starting to read a mystery novel: superficial calm masking anticipated danger.

Life here is deceptively normal. The streets are so jammed with cars that trucks and buses need special permission to invade from the suburbs; some streets have become virtual pedestrian malls as thousands of peddlers set up their tables or lay out their wares on rugs. Large wooden carts laden with gunny sacks full of grain, potatoes or dates are manhandled adroitly through the swirling crowds while sweating, yelling porters manhandle impossible loads or silently trudge under huge refrigerators or boxes that would tax the capacity of a small truck. Crowds are everywhere, moving about in what Kipling would have called typical Oriental splendor. There are more people now – since my first visit in 1947 Baghdad has grown from a little town of 50,000 or so to a city of more than 6 million -- and certainly far more cars, but in many ways it is still the Baghdad I saw first fifty years ago.

What is different is not the energy and frenzy of street life but the purposefulness of activity. Building cranes are busily at work on mammoth public buildings and even substantial private houses. Baghdad's people are not just surviving; they are moving hectically toward some sort of future. Just what that future might be would be terrifying if everyone were not so busy keeping out of the way of cars and pushcarts as he rushes through his daily chores.

Although I was easily identified as an American, even though I spoke Arabic, not one person made the slightest reference to the conflict between our countries. That is, with one exception, as I drove across the frontier from Jordan, I stopped to buy some dates, long the premier agricultural product of Iraq, and the shop keeper crossed the index fingers of his hands, the sign of hostility, as he

said “*Bushi, Iraq,*” but he immediately laughed. Each person I met, even the normally dour taxi drivers, said, “welcome, most welcome to Baghdad.”

Under that calm and friendly facade, however, there are abundant signs of tension. I expected fear, but that is not the word that comes to mind. Rather, tension is what I felt. Perhaps that is surprising. After all, the Baghdadis know war far more than most of us. What happened to New York in the September 11 attacks was a small taste of what hit Baghdad in the furious month-long American air strikes of 1991. In comparison, the Blitz of London was a sideshow and the famous devastation of Rotterdam hardly counted. The *Guernica* that Picasso immortalized as the essence of war was a mere outing. When the Baghdadis read their press or listen to their radios, they are in no doubt the real meaning of statements that America intends to shower this city with 300 or 400 cruise missiles a day. For them, that is not a statistic; it is a mortal threat. And it is not the worst possible vision of the immediate future. There is also talk of using tactical nuclear weapons, so-called “bunker busters,” which even children here know would spew out clouds of radioactive dust.

Although it was not fully understood at the time and has been little discussed since, the first Gulf War had a nuclear component too. The shells fired by tanks, artillery and even some aircraft were usually made of depleted uranium 238. Each tank shell, for example, contained over 4,500 grams of solid uranium, which, being heavier than iron, was considered more effective against armored vehicles. In the Gulf War, some 300 tons of such shells, some of which apparently also contained plutonium, were fired. Unfortunately, they were effective not only against armor. And not only against those actually hit. Wherever they were used, they set in motion a process that resulted in a marked increase of malignancy among adults, both soldiers and civilians. Children were particularly vulnerable; worst of all, infants were sometimes born with horrible defects. Little as we Westerners have heard of these things, they are common talk in Iraq.

Reports in the Western press that power stations, water purification plants, transport grids and even sewage treatment facilities are projected targets are also openly discussed here. I asked shopkeepers, taxi drivers, and people I met casually in the street about the guess of disaster relief agencies that upwards of a million people may flee their homes, without access to food or clean water. Almost all echoed the sad reflection of taxi driver. I mention him because having access to a car, he had the option. "What," he said, shaking his head, "leave my house? Where would I go? If I went to [the town of] Hilla or Kut, how could I get anything to eat or a roof over my children's heads. No, I will stay in Baghdad. It is better, after all, to die at home."

Later I asked the deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, about the much touted "option" of the government to hie off to some place of exile. He looked sternly at me and said, "Iraq is my country. I was born here. I will die here."

So, why, one must ask, the calm? Of course, it is largely deceptive. Teachers and doctors report a marked increase in the consumption of calming drugs, especially among children, while social workers say that, during their rounds, they witness much private anxiety. But still the outward calm is astonishing. Do the Iraqis expect the war to be averted, Saddam and his team to run away to some gilded exile or the UNITED NATIONS investigators miraculously to prove that no more weapons of mass destruction exist? None of the above. No one I have spoken to thinks what is called here the "Bushi war" will be averted. They expect the worst. The words "humanitarian disaster" have become part of daily speech.

Then, could the apparent calm come from the Islamic fatalism which Western observers always profess to find in the "mysterious East?" I find no evidence for this. Islam sits lightly on the average Baghdadi, far more lightly than upon the Kuwaiti, Saudi or Jordanian. Iraq has been a secular state from the beginning, and secularism, except for the occasional public show, has been the rule of

this regime. The regime is proud of its liberation of women and is bitterly hostile to the Muslim fundamentalists, the *mutasalafin*. To call someone a Wahhabi, like the followers of Usama bin Ladin, is to insult not only him as a person but his intelligence. It is to say that he is a backward, uneducated, a sort of country bumpkin. Like people everywhere, few Iraqis are really resigned to fate: they keep working and hoping even when faced with overwhelming odds.

And the odds are certainly overwhelming. Iraq had trouble, even in its better days, matching the power of neighboring and much more populous Iran. And during the “Bush war” it lost most of what had given it an edge over Iran. Its “air force,” now reduced to a handful of aging planes, is almost unable to take off; what remains of its tanks and armored personnel carriers are as battered, rusty and patched together as Baghdad’s taxi fleet and its now much smaller army has lost its élan. What America did not do to it, purges accomplished. Iraq now has a ghost army, suitable for television performances but almost certainly unable to move in any coordinated fashion or to project significant force. Fight, it may, in desperation, or as its leaders proclaim from house to house, all the while knowing that it will be futile and horribly costly and making no visible preparations for such a conflict.

So what underlies the apparent calm? My impression is that Baghdadis, like most of us, have learned to live on two levels: the immediate reality takes precedence over the future possibility. Getting dressed, fixing breakfast, going to work, performing the myriad chores of daily life, these all have to be done right now; worrying about the future, which, after all may or may not finally happen, can wait.

And so, Baghdad is waiting. Its 6 million people have taken on a corporate existence. One can feel it in the air. It is expecting the full horror of war as each person in it tries to keep his eyes fixed firmly on the comforting tasks of daily life.

This air of impending doom became evident even before I reached Baghdad. On the way here, I stopped in the capital of Jordan, Amman, and spoke to several old friends about what they expected to happen. They were, they said, absolutely convinced that, no matter what happens at the UNITED NATIONS Security Council and no matter what further reports the observers make, the Bush Administration will attack Iraq, as President Bush put it, “within weeks.” Nothing, they felt, could be done to avert the attack. The decision had been made months ago; some pointed to studies and statements made by the now-senior officials of the current Bush administration years ago. It was not a matter of Islamic predestination but of American policy. And so, Jordan will “keep its head down, trying to minimize the damage done to it.” It will try to maintain a neutral stance even if Israel joins in the attack on Iraq. That will be difficult, or perhaps even impossible, particularly if Prime Minister Sharon uses the war to push the Palestinians further off the West Bank or closes down completely what remains of the Palestinian national authority. But Jordan is determined to try.

As I got ready to drive across the 1,000 kilometers of desert to Baghdad, I was struck by how much in evidence arms were in Amman. Soldiers were everywhere. Jordan is today, as it has always been, a “soldier state.” And despite great improvements in the streets, the erection of imposing new buildings, a vast influx of people (Amman now numbers well over a million inhabitants) and a high degree of commercial prosperity, Jordan remains a military outpost on the desert frontier.

Its link with Iraq is fragile. The most evident part of that link is mobile: every day upwards of 1,000 giant oil tanker-trucks make the same drive I made, racing along at 120 kilometers an hour, heavily laden from Iraq to Jordan and returning empty to refill. The highway told the tale: the westward lane, used by the fully loaded trucks, was worn almost to the foundations whereas the eastward lane, used by the returning empty trucks, was as new.

As we drove along, I lost count at over 400 tanker-trucks in the 500 kilometers before we reached the half-way point at about the Iraqi frontier. There the highway divides with the trucks shunted aside from the double six-lane Iraqi highway to an auxiliary road. That road is the slender and fragile blood vein of Iraq's economy.

Politically, the link is more fragile than the road testifies. Jordanians do not like Saddam Husain. While Jordanians, like all the Arabs, indulge in "personality cults," they scoff at the excesses to which the Iraqi regime has carried the cult of Saddam. Reach the frontier and you understand the Jordanian remarks. Everywhere one's eyes fall, there is a poster or picture of Saddam, dressed for each separate occasion as a soldier, a typical amiable uncle, a school teacher, a businessman, a farmer or a bedouin; he appears as the portly model for some exotic fashion designer. Reach Baghdad and you find that the posters and pictures are augmented by colossal statues. In one, outside the university, he is appropriately dressed as the rector while at the city "gate," he is the guardian of his people, holding aloft a rifle.

What the reaction of Iraqis is to these displays is hard to fathom because people prudently turn away from such questions, but to visitors the displays appear either amusing or frightening. However, they are in character, not only of Saddam but also of each of his predecessors. I well remember the same poses on grandiose posters featuring the kings and dictators who went before him. Arabs, and particularly Iraqis, have an abiding weakness for the vanity of their leaders.

Visitors are one of the curious features of this city on the brink of war. The UN weapons survey team has grown to impressive size and its members can be identified by their dress, obviously purchased from some mountaineering store. They mostly keep to themselves in a separate hotel, but are as avidly pursued by flocks of photojournalists as movie stars used to be in Rome by the *paparazzi*.

Even more striking are another group of visitors, the peace activists. Hundreds of peace activists have streamed into Baghdad to offer their protests against the announced American invasion and their bodies as human shields. Despite their diverse origins – Americans, various Europeans, Africans and Asians -- they too have their distinctive dress and badges. I saw one group from Ohio who were dressed as though for a trip to a mall or a football match but around their necks, they wore signs proclaiming their purpose in large letters: “STOP THE WAR ON IRAQ.” Most carry unusual (and for Iraqis, outlandish) back packs, presumably laden with lunch boxes and drinking water. In the evenings they lounge around the hotel lobby, tired from the day’s movement, which consists mainly in being seen and in accosting journalists, and bored from having already visited every shop in the hotel. Their mecca is the alcoholless bar which features an internet site with twenty or so new computers primed and ready to go and, undoubtedly, well recorded by various security services.

The Iraqis to whom I have talked are grateful for the peace activists’ gesture but are not quite sure what to make of them. Such up-welling of genuinely emotional and obviously anti-government protest would be unimaginable here. It thus presents a curious contrast in attitudes: the peace activists are protesting in a thoroughly American fashion against American policies in a way that Iraqis who feel themselves to be the victims of American policy could not imagine doing themselves.

Mingled with them, often to their annoyance, are the journalists who were lucky enough to get visas. I have counted about thirty in this hotel alone. They come from all over the world, are well looked after by the Ministry of Information, pampered but watched, usually “assisted” by official “minders” who facilitate (and report on) their movements. The Iraqis, this time officials, are even more nonplused by them than by the activists. To be a journalist here is to be the recipient of and reproducer of government hand-outs. To demand the right to go see for oneself, to write critical pieces and to cast doubt on the official line is as shocking a departure as the inspectors’ insistence on

the right to snoop at will. The Iraqis are trying to get used to both practices, but it is certainly taxing their patience.

However much the UN inspectors, the journalists and the peace activists differ from one another, all are astonished by one common experience: money. The Iraqi dinar which I remember from past visits as the equivalent of about three American dollars is now trading at between 2,000 and 2,500 to the dollar. When I cashed a \$50 bill I was awarded a stack of bills that would have supplied a couple of dozen games of Monopoly. The larger bills, with a face value of 250 dinars, were worth 10 to 15 cents each. Perhaps the best thing about Baghdad today is that almost any visitor can become an instant millionaire.

Prices are low but few people earn much. The most astonishing is the price of gasoline: four liters (roughly a gallon) of high-test gasoline costs the equivalent of one cent. (My driver from Jordan had a specially equipped car that would hold 160 liters so he could fill it in Iraq for his round trips). But even at a penny a gallon, a Baghdad taxi driver earns only \$5-10 a day because his car and its tires have to be imported at great cost. The low man on the economic pole, a draftee in the army, earns the equivalent of about \$3 a month and is poorly dressed. A school teacher does better but not much. To feed his family, he is helped by a rationing system that distributes food at low cost, but if he wants to supplement his diet, he finds meat costing \$2.50 a kilo. Hard as he finds it to sustain his family, he is still "privileged." Unemployment is certainly widespread but hard to gage; underemployment is the more common experience. Driven by need, almost everyone becomes a peddler, hawking everything he can get his hands on. As I walked down the central street, which has changed little from my first visit, I saw little clots of people squatting by the gutter, selling bars of soap, used clothes, candles, each person having a stock that could not have been worth more than a few dollars. Even selling out his stock completely could hardly have made up a day's needs.

As I walked along, an old man stopped me. Looking at my shoes and seeing that I was a foreigner, he asked if I had a second pair. When I said yes, he offered to buy the ones I had on. Later, one of the drivers outside my hotel asked me to finger the sleeve of his jacket. He mentioned the name of a well-known European designer and almost proudly explained that he had bought it second hand. Like many poor countries, Iraq has a thriving market for European and American secondhand clothes. One wonders where jobbers find the vast quantities that end up here.

Poverty and want also promote a thriving exchange market: one man doesn't need all the rice he gets in his ration (at 15 cents a kilogram) and swaps some of it for part of another person's cooking oil (worth 20 cents a liter) and so on. Barter is the grease of the poor man's economy, but most of his transactions still depend on money; so even shoeshine boys have learned to flip through piles of bills with the eye and speed of an experienced money changer. The good thing about even nearly worthless money is that it gives an illusion. And Baghdad needs illusions.

The worst thing in Baghdad, of course, is the guessing about what tomorrow will bring. I asked a taxi driver, every city's gossip, what he was doing about it. He shrugged. Have you, I probed, laid in a stock of food? He shrugged again, but admitted that he had stored in his *sirdab* (the half-cellar that serves as the poor man's air conditioner in the scorching summer months) sacks of rice, wheat, beans and other dried vegetables. How about water? I insisted. Water, I pontificated, is the absolutely vital emergency supply. No, he replied "it is too expensive." A six-pack of bottles costs about 3,000 dinars or roughly 15 cents. "My children would drink me out of everything I own in a week," he waved his hands in a futile gesture. I was about to lecture him on this improvidence when I remembered my own reaction to the Cuba Missile Crisis. As I sat in my Washington office closely observing the events of that dreadful week, there came a particular moment on the Thursday when I was reasonably sure we had lost it, that war was upon us. I vividly remember reaching for the

telephone to tell my wife to leave town. I pulled my hand back from the telephone, feeling like that
Baghdad taxi driver: if hell really does descend on earth, why bother.

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William R. Polk first visited Baghdad in 1947 and has been there often since. After studies at Oxford and Harvard Universities, he taught Middle Eastern history and politics and the Arabic language at Harvard. Then in 1961 President Kennedy made him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State, in charge of planning for North Africa and the Middle East. In 1965 he became Professor of History and founder-director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago. Later he was also president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. He is now a director of the W.P. Carey Foundation. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century* and *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*.