

The Real Baghdad

By

Ryzsard Krystosik

October 3, 2002

Until Saddam Hussein's regime is toppled and democracy established in Iraq, regional security and stability in the Middle East will be threatened, and the Iraqi people will continue to suffer. The new government must be more than a rebirth of the present dictatorship with a different face in order to enact real internal changes in Iraq.

News from Iraq focuses on war plans, the possibility of weapons inspectors returning, the political struggles in the United Nations, and debates between decision-makers and policy planners. Not much, however, has been said about the realities of daily life in Iraq. Having spent six years in Baghdad as a senior Polish diplomat charged with protecting the interests of the United States, I had a rare opportunity to witness the sharp contrasts between the regime and the people and juxtapose realities with illusions. I had a chance to compare the official policy statements with the daily practices and true actions of the Iraqi authorities.

For the overwhelming majority of Iraqis, life is extremely difficult. Only the very top percentile of the elite live really well. In Baghdad, it is not uncommon that a university professor uses his car as a taxi for extra income. Your driver will tell you how before 1991, his salary was two or even three times higher than that of his European and American colleagues. Now, he earns \$8-10 per month. He used to be a strong supporter of the regime, but no longer.

The same can be said of lawyers, medical doctors, architects, engineers, and business executives—all former members of the elite. They used to maintain close contact with the West, travel abroad every year, and frequent the best hotels and restaurants. Now, they can hardly afford a sidewalk cafe in Baghdad.

The support of the middle class for the regime gets weaker by the day, but this is more a sign of resignation than of active protest. It would be too difficult, too dangerous, to express real dissatisfaction. The lower income groups in Baghdad are even worse off, earning no more than \$1 or \$2 a month. Yet they still live much better than the people of Mosul, Ramadi or Basra, not to mention those in the countryside.

The real city of Baghdad, day by day, deteriorates. In other parts of the city—close to the riverbanks in Mansur and Adamiya or in Masbah—one can see palaces and mansions. Money from the Oil for Food program is siphoned into luxury purchases for the top elite. They buy expensive foreign cars, shop in boutiques selling Gucci, Yves St. Laurent, and Pierre Cardin. The elite have imported electronic equipment, but most of the residents of Baghdad have little access to popular entertainment. Access to the Internet is forbidden in practice if not law. You can watch state TV or Uday's Shabab Television, which broadcast mostly news, but it is hard to be sure whether the footage was shot a day, a week, a month, or years ago.

Coverage of international events has increased, but political censorship remains. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Foreign Department of the Mukhabarat, and presidential advisors, on the other hand, watch CNN.

The Iraqi press is assigned the task of feeding ordinary people incorrect information. The differences between newspapers—the government's *Al Gumhuriya*, the armed force's *Qadasiya*, or Ba'athist *Al Thawra*—are only slight. In *Babil*, Uday's newspaper, it is possible to find editorials and articles criticizing Iraqi foreign policy and the practices of the Mukhabarat. Some criticism in *Babil* even leads to the dismissal of government officials.

Uday's people also control the foreign currency exchange. Tourists, diplomats, foreign journalists, and businessmen have to pay their bills in dinars. In banks the official rate, approximately \$3 for one dinar, is used. In the commercial exchange in kiosks, it is approximately 2,000 dinars to the dollar.

Certain adjustments in internal policy have been made, but this does not mean that the iron fist has been loosened. All aspects of life are controlled and monitored. Political control is carried out by the Ba'ath Party through a domestic affairs department. Every Ba'ath Party member is obliged to report on the situation in his community. These reports are analyzed and compared with other reports, then the information is checked by the internal security division of the Mukhabarat and reported to Saddam Hussein and his advisors.

The real power and efficiency of the system of control in Iraq is not represented by checkpoints and uniformed military patrols. It is difficult to notice the state security officers in their civilian clothing, but dark olive uniforms, the red bandanas of the Republican Guard, and the red berets of the notorious military police are visible everywhere. The dreadful effectiveness of the

security forces is based on extreme brutality. The security troops are ready to shoot to kill just to disperse a crowd. The bodies of the dead are rarely returned to their families, which has a tremendous psychological impact. The people of Baghdad live in a state of constant terror.

At the same time, the crime rate in Baghdad is extremely high and made worse by bloody family feuds. People do not count on the police for protection. It is not uncommon to have a handgun or Kalashnikov rifle at home, but using it will mean serious trouble. Stories circulate of illegal organ harvesting, gang violence, drug trafficking, gambling, and prostitution--crimes condoned by the Mukhabarat and the police if the right bribe is offered.

Crime contributes to the destitution of the average Iraqi. They do not, however, complain loudly. They will blame the sanctions in accordance with the official party line to protect their families, but they understand the truth. Saddam Hussein dominates everything. His days seemed to be numbered at the end of the Gulf War, but he found an escape route and has strengthened his domestic position.

Will he be able to cope with the present crisis? It is possible that he will be prevented from rebuilding his nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs and threatening regional security. It is possible that he will succeed in changing the face of the regime to keep power. But this will offer the Iraqi people little hope. Only regime change and a successful democratic transition will give them a chance at a new life free of fear.

Ryszard Krystosik is the former chief of the United States Interests Section in Baghdad, Iraq, a position he relinquished in 2001. From 1990 to 1994, he was a deputy director in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Krystosik has served in numerous positions in the Polish Embassy in Washington, D.C. and was a member of the Polish Permanent Mission to the United Nations. In 2001, Mr. Krystosik received the Distinguished Service Award from the U.S. secretary of state.

