



The Reckoning

*Iraq and the Legacy of
Saddam Hussein*



Sandra Mackey



THE RECKONING

Iraq

and the Legacy of

Saddam Hussein

S A N D R A M A C K E Y



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TO MY MOTHER,

*who contained the furies of her anxieties to let
me go where I chose*

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PREFACE

I have been on a journey through the Persian Gulf since the late 1970s. It began in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where I arrived in 1978 at the height of the oil boom and lived until the mid-1980s. As a freelance journalist, I wrote about the effects of the money let loose by the explosion of oil prices in 1973, pouring blessings and curses on the countries of the Gulf. Iraq was one of them.

At the time, the influence of Saddam Hussein in his own country and the region was present but not omnipresent. He was a shadow in the background of Iraq, which moved to a quicker rhythm than the oil-rich monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. In contrast to Riyadh, where the boom times strained against the strictures of Islam's most rigid sect, Baghdad throbbed with the beat of secularism and license. By the standards of Beirut in the days before civil war consumed Lebanon, the gaudy nightclubs of Baghdad were perhaps even louder and more raucous. The art scene was livelier as visual artists pushed the limits of the human figure in an Islamic society. Seduction was, in fact, everywhere. A government intent on buying the loyalty of its citizens dipped money out of its petroleum coffers and poured it into the hands of almost every Iraqi. As a result, optimism born of a prosperity never even imagined traveled down the socioeconomic scale and back up again. The vibrancy created by mass participation in a boom economy promised to seal the deep fissures in a society that had always challenged the integrity of the Iraqi state. But the cracks never closed. Although I wrote that Iraq's southern neighbors on the Arabian Peninsula shivered in what they regarded to be an ominous shadow cast by Baghdad, I joined other Western writers who perceived, but never fully comprehended, the depth of evil in the man who lurked just off stage.

By 1984, as my residency in the Persian Gulf region was ending,

Saddam Hussein already had held the president's chair for five years, oil prices had dropped below \$30 a barrel, and Iraq was bogged down in the fourth year of the bloodbath known as the Iran-Iraq War. Although Baghdad outwardly looked much the same, the spirit of earlier years was gone. Copious amounts of money still flowed out of the national treasury but it largely went to the war effort, not to the citizenry. And the hobnailed boot of Hussein pressed ever harder on the neck of the Iraqis. When I left the Arab side of the Persian Gulf, Iraq was living amid the broken promises of the oil boom.

For the next several years, I worked away from the Gulf. I wrote about the war in Lebanon, the Palestinians, and the Arab world as a whole. When I returned to the Persian Gulf in 1992, it was to the eastern side, to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Over the next three years, my writing concentrated on Persian culture, Shia Islam, and the fierce tug of war for control of the Islamic revolution between the disciples of Ayatollah Khomeini and the growing number of moderates. It was not until I began to research this book that I returned to the Arab side of the Gulf.

I stepped into Iraq in 1998 to find the country a ghost of the Iraq of the late 1970s. The Iraqis had been devastated by two wars—the eight-year-long death struggle with Iran and the months-long conflict with the United States and the coalition that waged the Persian Gulf War. Seven years of sanctions had reduced members of the vaunted middle class created by the oil boom to paupers whose only guaranteed food supplies came from rations distributed under rules imposed by the United Nations. In comparison to the late 1970s, the streets were deserted. Most of Baghdad's flashy nightclubs were dark and silent. The showy hotels, where once guests pressed lavish bribes on the clerks at the front desk to obtain a room, stood nearly empty. The rooms that were occupied contained dingy, threadbare towels, perhaps the last survivors of the oil boom. Across the city, the shelves of stores that had once bulged with imported goods from the United States, Europe, and Asia were almost empty. The educational system that had promised to educate every child and to train the finest doctors, engineers, and scholars was in shambles. The hospitals that once served as the flagships of Middle East medicine were stripped of almost everything including sheets. But more than anything, Iraq had become a prison in which everyone lived in fear of its warden—Saddam Hussein.

I returned to Iraq again after oil prices began to escalate. The infusion of new money had brought marginal improvement on the physical side. I saw more medicine, more consumer goods, more infrastructure improvements, all made possible by the combination of increased oil revenues and a loosening of the sanctions. Still, the towering walls and miserable conditions of Hussein's prison remained the same.

For an American, a trip into Iraq requires enormous effort, a wide network of contacts, plenty of cash, and a strong heart. Until recently, the easiest way to reach Baghdad was over land via Amman, Jordan, an eight- to ten-hour trek across the desert. Once there, foreigners, particularly writers, are usually required to stay at the al-Rashid Hotel. The marble building and fenced grounds literally crawl with secret police. Everyone—gardeners, bellboys, clerks on the desk, switchboard operators, maids, waiters, the smartly uniformed attendants in the business center, the manager—is tied into the Mukhabarat, the Arabic name for the honeycomb of security services that constitute the backbone of Hussein's police state. Surveillance is so obvious that when I tried to switch on a bedside light, I found a microphone in place of the lightbulb. When I finally succeeded in convincing the Foreign Ministry to allow me to vacate the al-Rashid, I found my room at the new hotel facing a three-story building belonging to a branch of the Mukhabarat. Every time I peered out the window, men armed with automatic rifles circling the roof peered back.

To venture beyond Baghdad requires an official government escort. Labeled a "minder" by those put in his charge, he determines where and when you go. En route he drops questions and elicits answers, all of which he dutifully records in a daily report that goes into your personal file at the security services. Although it is possible to move around alone on the streets of Baghdad, the exercise can be perilous. Late one evening when I moved in too close on a birthday celebration for Hussein, I was apprehended by a gun-toting guard who summoned the security services. Although I managed to talk my way out of the clutches of four fearsome men in olive-green berets, the episode confirmed what I already knew—traveling in Iraq is a high-risk undertaking.

For Iraqis trapped in the fear and brutality of Hussein's despotism, ordinary life is a deadly serious game. Spies lurk everywhere,

ready to turn the most casual comment into grounds for imprisonment or execution. Engulfed in this cocoon of fear, people keep to themselves. This isolation of Iraqis from foreigners and from each other has totally changed the atmosphere of Iraq since I first arrived in the Gulf. Arab society is notoriously hospitable. Entrance to an office always means tea. A question asked to a total stranger can produce an invitation home. There among the family, the visitor experiences the Arabs' great art form—conversation. But in Iraq, all of that has been crushed over the years since Hussein became the sole leader of his tortured country. Now a current of tension runs through every encounter with an Iraqi. There is no conversation, only an exchange of banalities, which themselves are guarded and carefully weighed. The occasional and dangerous furtive comment quickly whispered is the only glimpse into the mind and soul of an Iraqi in this third decade under the rule of the tyrant of Baghdad. How it all happened lies in the nature and experience of Iraq before and after the founding of the Iraqi state. The purpose of this book is to explain what it all will mean to Iraq, the Persian Gulf, and the United States after the political or physical demise of Saddam Hussein.

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No author ever writes in isolation. The difficult process of book writing requires the help and support of a wide circle of people. For this book, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Phebe Marr, who led me through so many of the intricacies of Iraqi culture; to Andrew Parasiliti, who not only graciously shared his expertise on Iraq but also read the manuscript; to William Quandt, whose wisdom on the Middle East is always so enlightening; to Ambassador W. Nathaniel Howell, who shared his many experiences of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait; to Ambassador Morton Abramowitz for his efforts to gain me access to northern Iraq; and to Adam Stulberg for helping a novice understand the various levels of military threat posed by Iraq. Lastly, I must thank my dear friend and mentor, R. K. Ramazani, whose wisdom and understanding of the Persian Gulf always makes such an invaluable contribution to any work on the region. I also want to thank Nesta Ramazani, whose interest and hospitality mean so much to me.

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I am grateful to the many Iraqis in London, Amman, Baghdad, Washington, New York, and a dozen other places who took the time to share with me their histories, their experiences, and their dreams for a better day in their country.

There is a special person to whom I owe a profound debt of gratitude. Because of the extraordinary circumstances that now exist in