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LIFE IN BASRA UNDER SADDAM



WHY IT'S DIFFICULT TO MAKE COMPARISONS

1. Basra's situation had not been "normal" since the beginning of the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War in 1979 (which didn't end until 1988). Much of the fighting took place in Basra Province, causing suffering to the population (many of whom left), and disruption to economic life and extensive damage to the infrastructure. The First Gulf War (1991) did further damage, as did the subsequent uprising and the suppression thereof—and Saddam's reprisals, particularly the draining of the marshes.
2. Data from both periods cannot be relied upon, albeit for different reasons.
3. Whether individuals and groups in Basra (as elsewhere in Iraq) perceive their lives to be better or worse as a result of the overthrow of Saddam must depend a lot on who they are. For example, Sunnis would be more likely than Shia to regret the passing of the Baathist regime (because the Shia are now dominant). And women would be more likely than men to feel that conditions are worse now (because of the social restrictions imposed by Muslim zealots). But note the ABC News poll cited below (in para 6).

WHY IT'S UNWISE TO MAKE COMPARISONS

4. It is not possible to make a robust case that life in Basra today is better than it was under Saddam. It seems much safer to assert that life is getting better, if we believe that to be true.
5. The overthrow of Saddam led to expectations of a much better life. Basrawis are likely to judge their present situation against these expectations rather than against conditions under Saddam.

WHAT WAS WORSE UNDER SADDAM

6. Life overall was worse under Saddam for a clear majority of Basrawis, if a poll published in Feb 07 is to be believed. In Basra City, 72% of respondents said that life had got somewhat or much better overall since 2003; the figure for Basra Province was 67%.¹
7. The political situation was worse for Basrawis and others living in the southern Provinces. As evidence of this, 94% of a sample of returnees after 2003 gave the change in the political situation as one of the main reasons for going back. UNHCR estimates that 85,080 persons returned to Basra Province between 2003 and September 2006.²
8. Political organisations were persecuted and banned from operating in Iraq. They now have an established presence in Basra (as elsewhere in the country). In the Saddam period, voters voted as the authorities wished for fear of reprisals if they did not, e.g., in the presidential referendum of October 1995.³
9. Independent civil society organisations were not allowed to operate. Since 2003, between 150 and 300 such organisations are thought to have established

¹ ABC News Polling Unit: "Iraq: Where Things Stand". 19 Mar 2007.

² UNHCR report, 31 Aug 2006.

³ UNHCR report, 8 Nov 1995.

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themselves. They cover a range of issues, including environmental protection, health, education and religious affairs.⁴

10. Following the collapse of the 1991 uprising, the regime inflicted severe human rights abuses on the people of the South (including Basra). The abuses continued long after the uprising had been suppressed. Some examples:

- In the aftermath of the uprising, Saddam's son Uday personally executed dissidents in Basra.
- Saddam's Mukhabarat (secret police) tortured and summarily executed a large number of people in March 1999 in Burjesiyya near Zubair (some 20 km southeast of Basra).
- In 1998 and 1999, the army bombarded a number of residential areas of some of the tribes living in Basra Province.⁵
- The authorities used bulldozers to destroy the houses of dissidents in Basra City and elsewhere in the Province.⁶
- The Mukhabarat are known to have threatened residents of Basra who were relatives of dissidents living in exile, in an attempt to secure the latter's collaboration.⁷
- In July 2002, the Mukhabarat are alleged to have executed five men in Basra, following charges that they belonged to religious parties working as agents of Iran.⁸

11. Under Saddam, the concept of human rights was not recognised anywhere in Iraq. It now is, and the concept is embodied in the Ministry of Human Rights, which opened an office in Basra Governorate in October 2004. Any legal obstacles to the exercise by Iraqis of their human rights have been removed (although new non-legal obstacles have emerged).⁹

12. During the Saddam period, the legal system (including but not exclusively in Basra) had lost its independence. Moreover, there were military and special courts operating outside the regular judicial system. Corruption, torture and other abuses were endemic.¹⁰ Reforms introduced into the legal system since 2003 have improved the situation (although there is scope for further improvement in a number of areas).

13. In Basra Province, the draining of the marshes caused the collapse of Marsh Arab society and its traditional way of life. A large number of Marsh Arabs sought refuge in Iran or elsewhere in Iraq. The Iran-Iraq war also caused a great deal of displacement (mostly of Marsh Arabs) from Basra Governorate. Many of these were able to return after 2003.¹¹

14. In 2000, the World Food Programme reported nutritional problems throughout the Centre/South of Iraq (so including Basra). In particular, malnutrition among

⁴ UNHCR report, 31 Aug 2006.

⁵ UNHCR report, 26 Feb 1999.

⁶ Report of UN Special Rapporteur, 14 Oct 1999.

⁷ See example cited in "Saddam Hussein: crimes and human rights abuses. A report on the human cost of Saddam's policies", FCO, 2 Dec 2002 (compiled by Robert Wilson, MENARG). The practice would not have been confined to Basra.

⁸ Report of UN Special Rapporteur E/CN.4/2003/40, 23 Jan 2003.

⁹ UNHCR report, 31 Aug 2006.

¹⁰ UNAMI/OHCHR, Building and Strengthening the National Human Rights Protection System in Iraq, Dec 2004.

¹¹ Institute of Migration, Basrah Profile, Oct-Dec 2005.

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children was "very serious". The same report said that child mortality had more than doubled since the end of the 1980s.¹²

15. Military service was compulsory.¹³ Deserters from the army were punished with amputation of the ears and branding of the forehead.

16. Centralised control of the country had deprived the Basrawis of local initiative.¹⁴

17. Access to the wide range of sources of information available today (including international satellite TV and the internet) was not possible before 2003, because of control by the Mukhabarat.¹⁵ Moreover, Basra now has local media (TV, radio and newspapers) as well as branches of independent national media networks—these things did not exist under Saddam.

18. The oil industry (mostly in the South) was starved of investment. Under Saddam, production capacity fell.¹⁶

19. Other infrastructure (power, water, drains etc) was also neglected over a period of decades: by 2003 the city was seriously dilapidated. This dilapidation was not attributable solely to Coalition action or even sanctions.¹⁷ Investment in infrastructure in southern Iraq (so including Basra) lagged far behind that in Tikrit, Samarra and Baghdad and (to a lesser extent) other cities in the centre of the country. For example, a survey conducted in 1995 found that half of the rural population in the South (so including Basra Province) had no access to potable water.¹⁸

20. According to a UNDP survey conducted in 2004, 95% of Basrawis questioned said that their economic situation had been difficult before 2003 (but remained so).¹⁹

21. Salaries have generally increased since 2003. However, disposable income has not increased to the same extent, because benefits have been cut in some sectors and living costs have increased.²⁰

22. Consumer goods were less readily available before 2003. Electrical appliances are a case in point. (However, their greater use since 2003 has led to acute power shortages in Basra, with the 2004 UNDP survey showing that only 58% of households in the Province had a stable electricity supply. The position seems to got better since then, as a result of work by DfID to improve the electricity supply to 1.5 mn residents. The equivalent of a 24-hour electricity supply has been secured for 85,000 households.

WHAT WAS BETTER UNDER SADDAM

23. It was easier to survive as an individual when there was only one oppressor, and a largely predictable one at that. Now there are a number of oppressors and they are not so predictable as the Baath were. Basrawis (City and Province) questioned in early 2007 *all* said they felt "not very safe" or "not safe at all"; none said they felt

¹² World Food Programme press release, 13 Sep 2000. According to UNICEF figures, the mortality rate for children under five was 50 per 1,000 in 1990 and 125 per 1,000 in 1,000. The Iraqi Red Crescent had the figure of 94 deaths per 1,000 births for 1997.

¹³ UNHCR report, 31 Aug 2006.

¹⁴ Robin Lamb (CG): "Basra: Reflections", 11 Aug 2006, CONFID.

¹⁵ "My name is Ali", Basra telegram, 26 Jan 2005, REST.

¹⁶ Robin Lamb (CG): "Basra: Reflections", 11 Aug 2006, CONFID.

¹⁷ Email from Robert Wilson (served in Basra 2003-04), 5 Sep 2007.

¹⁸ UNHCR report, 8 Nov 1995.

¹⁹ UNDP Iraq Living Conditions Report, 2004.

²⁰ UNHCR report, 31 Aug 2006.

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- "very safe". Residents of Basra City and outlying areas are afraid to travel after dark.²¹
24. Basra was socially more liberal than it is today. Islamic dress code for women was not enforced in Saddam's time.²² Women had more opportunities for active participation in education, employment and society outside the home. A UN survey in 2004 found that 89% of women aged 15 and over were not in employment, compared to 26% of men, and the position for women is not likely to have improved since then.²³ Men and women were able to mix freely in public in a way they cannot today, without the risk of being attacked verbally or physically. Shops could sell alcohol, films and recorded music.²⁴
25. The Sunni minority (about 15% of the population in Basra City) was not targeted by armed groups as it has been since the overthrow of Saddam. Other smaller minority groups (Chaldo-Assyrians, Mandaeans) have expressed concern that the growth of religious and political groups and militias since 2003 have impacted negatively on their ability to pursue their customs and way of life. For example, the ringing of church bells no longer takes place because of the fear of reprisals. Minority tribal and ethnic groups are more vulnerable these days to persecution and criminality, because they lack the protection of political parties, militias or tribes.²⁵
26. Housing was less expensive than it is today, because demand was less than it is now. Between April 2003 and 2005, property construction prices are thought to have tripled and rental prices doubled (although rental prices fell back in 2006 because of the flight of members of minority groups and the greater availability of housing).²⁶
27. Unemployment in Basra Governorate is estimated by local officials to be around 60%.²⁷ The closure of state-owned enterprises is partly responsible for this situation. We do not have a pre-2003 figure for unemployment which is specific to Basra, but the national rate was around 30%.²⁸
28. There shortage of doctors and nurses appears not to have been as severe as it is today. According to a 1997 UNICEF report, "a significant number of professionals [not only in the health sector] have left Iraq due to the economic situation."²⁹ This exodus seems to have accelerated since 2003, at least as far as the health sector is concerned. For example, between January and August 2006, at least 200 health professionals left Basra as a result of the insecurity there.³⁰
29. Rubbish collection is less frequent than it was. This is partly the result of insecurity, but partly of the fact that the trucks are old and no longer working.³¹

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²¹ Ibid.

²² "My name is Fatima", Basra eGram 21365/05.

²³ UNDP Iraq Living Conditions Report, 2004.

²⁴ UNHCR report, 31 Aug 2006.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Written Answer to PQ, 10 May 2004, by Secretary of State for International Development.

²⁹ "Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Iraq - 1997", UNICEF, Apr 1998.

³⁰ UNHCR report, 31 Aug 2006.

³¹ Ibid.

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