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## **AFTER THE WAR: IDEOLOGY; In Search for Baath Loyalists, U.S. Finds Itself in Gray Area**

By AMY WALDMAN

Ahmad Saleh al-Wan says he languished for 15 years in an Iranian prison, a foot soldier in Iraq's unwinnable war against its neighbor. When he came home in 1997, his eyesight ruined, Saddam Hussein gave him his reward: he was made a "group" member in the Baath Arab Socialist Party, the vehicle for Mr. Hussein's rise to power and his grip on it. An honor, the rank more importantly meant higher pay for Mr. Wan in his job at a government printing plant.

But six years later, Mr. Hussein is gone, the Americans are here, and the reward that was meant to ease Mr. Wan's life has, he says, ruined it.

Under a policy to "de-Baathify" Iraq imposed in May by L. Paul Bremer III, the American administrator, all public employees with the rank of group or above in the party have lost their jobs. Like many of his former colleagues, Mr. Wan, 51, is applying for an exemption. But for now, he says he has no way to support his five children. Gaunt and unkempt, he comes to the printing plant and hangs about like a ghost.

The policy is one piece of the effort under way here to "extirpate" -- the word of Mr. Bremer's choosing -- the remnants of the old government, and rid Iraq of an ideology that was born long before Mr. Hussein's rule but became inextricably intertwined with it. Mr. Hussein took over the party in the 1960's and rode its slogan of "One Arab Nation With an Eternal Message" and its principles of unity, freedom and socialism, for more than three decades.

Much like the Nazi Party, and the Communist parties of Eastern Europe, the Baath Party came to play a central role in disseminating propaganda, stifling dissent, and ensuring that neighbors and colleagues policed each other's behavior, speech and thought.

The effort to "de-Baathify" Iraq mirrors efforts in postwar Germany and Japan and the post-Communist Soviet bloc. It is seen as the first step in building a new, democratic culture here, and undoing the legacy of 30 years of authoritarian rule. But like all principles, this one is easier to pronounce than apply.

Not all of the people affected are as sympathetic as Mr. Wan. There are plenty like Ibrahim al-Najim, 55, a university administrator and unrepentant Baathist who conceded passing reports about people up the party chain but said he could not be held accountable for how the security services used the information. Even now, his greatest regret about Mr. Hussein's rule is not gross violations of human rights but his betrayal of the party's pan-Arabic ideology by the invasion of Kuwait.

But many people, probably most, fall in between as those who went along to get along, who did not believe but did not defy. "I'm one of the ones with clean hands," said Fawzia Habib Hassan, a school principal and ranking party member who is now out of work.

Some worry that the current approach may sweep up some whose complicity was only nominal - and leave many of the guilty untouched. Low-level members could have given the word that sent someone to prison as easily as higher-ranking ones, even non-Baathists say.

### Hints and Accusations

The Baathists also overlapped with and worked closely with the vast security apparatus, which has been dissolved but not brought to account. Some Baathists accrued wealth or property, sometimes taken from their victims, that could give them a leg up in a new free-market economy. All of this will have to be sorted out for some sense of justice to prevail in the new Iraq, a process that may take years.

At the Association of Freed Prisoners in Baghdad, where volunteers have amassed millions of government and party files, they are finding that the identities of many of those who gave orders for executions and the like were masked by code names or numbers.

But the association is also closely guarding any information about perpetrators until a new justice system is in place. "We do not want to start trouble within Iraqi society," said the association's administrator, Nasir Jasim Lazeem al-Khrawi, 43.

In the meantime, millions of minds shaped by the party's culture of eliminating choice and smothering initiative will have to be retooled.

That culture is well documented in fat notebooks that fill a maze of lightless rooms beneath the Baath Party's National Command headquarters in Baghdad. Much of the bureaucracy recorded here is banal: Iraqis informing on one another and then the reports moving up the party chain of command in a voluminous, handwritten paper trail.

The party had at least 1.2 million members of a total population of about 24 million, and it had many more supporters, but ultimately only one member counted. The files include letters appealing directly to Mr. Hussein.

A dismissed Baath Party member from Basra wrote to him in desperation, "The accusation I have connections to Iranians is false."

The recruiting plan for a southern district includes this thought: "Show the importance of the leadership of Saddam Hussein to lead the Baath Party, the country, and oppose the aggressions of the Americans and Zionists on our country."

The plan further suggests training all Baath Party members in light and heavy weapons, and "creating a deeper understanding of the democratic concepts of the Baath Party in this society."

Over time, party membership became a prerequisite for most chances at higher education and many promotions in the public and even private sector. There were other sources of power in Iraq, including those linked to Mr. Hussein by tribe or birth, but the party held its own until the end.

One March 2002 decree in the Baath files orders that students applying for advanced degrees meet the party's security and intellectual requirements. Such decrees constitute the defense of those who say they are being unfairly punished for trying to survive and succeed in a system that showed no sign of ending.

"I'm sure Mr. Bremer and the new administration will understand this was our duty," said Hyam Sabri, 38, the principal at El Najat Secondary School for girls in eastern Baghdad. "We had to be Baathists." She said she joined the party at the age of 12 because she knew even then that she wanted to teach. In 1997 she became a group member, which means that she has now lost her job.

### Defining Duty

Mr. Bremer and his aides bring a different understanding to the Baathists. Scott Carpenter, a deputy assistant secretary of state whose portfolio in Iraq includes weeding out senior Baathists, argues that the process should be the administration's "No. 1 priority," even if it slows the revival of government services.

"Unless you scrub hard," Mr. Carpenter said in an interview, "you can't create the seedbed" for a new society. For now, he said, the occupation should "cut very deeply." Over time the Iraqis may create, as the Allies and the Germans did with many Nazis after World War II, a mechanism to rehabilitate former Baathists.

In Iraq, Americans are relying more on the model set by the purging processes throughout Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism. Mr. Carpenter spent time there, and said that in some countries the Communists simply capitalized on the assets and networks they had amassed while in power to reinvent themselves.

He has little sympathy for those who say they had no choice but to rise in the Baath Party.

"There was also somebody who said no," Mr. Carpenter said. "It represents that fundamental human choice."

From the view of the American soldiers charged with putting the policy in place, things are less black and white. To the chagrin of the civilian administration, some commanders have tried to use Baathists with skills and experience to get government services running again. Other commanders complain that excluding so many people from the building of a new society is creating an army of disenfranchised people.

And many soldiers are finding that, up close, nuance crowds in. "It's kind of dicey -- who was just toeing the line, doing what they had to do, and those ideologues," said Lt. Louis Morelli, 26,

of the First Armored Division, who is based at Baghdad University. "There's a gray area." His unit has been besieged with anonymous tips and letters complaining about Baathists still in their jobs. They must sort through it all, weeding out the personal grievances.

The unit also wants to save a man it has fired, Hamid al-Muhammad, 36, a champion high-jumper. "I've got kind of an attachment to him," said First Lt. Mike Messner, 25.

Mr. Muhammad willingly concedes that he joined the party in 1991, but said that was only because he wanted to finish his higher education. "It was a choice -- you step backward to guarantee two steps forward," he said. His two brothers chose not to become members, and they never found jobs.

Mr. Muhammad earned a doctorate and worked as a physical trainer and extracurricular activity coordinator at Saddam University. In 2001, he became a group member in the party -- at students' insistence, he said. Now he is unemployed, with a pregnant wife and severely disabled daughter. He has no skill essential to the allies or the Iraqi people, as the exemption application demands. It comes down to this, Lieutenant Morelli said: "good character, good values."

#### Exceptions to a Rule

That probably will not be enough. Even the president of Saddam University -- now renamed Nahrain University -- faces an uphill battle in trying to rehire the 25 professors he has lost of 260. Many are highly trained specialists.

The president, Dr. Mahmoud Hayawi Hamash al-Tikriti, has dutifully made the case for his fired professors, but he holds out little hope. Saddam University was founded in 1993 to provide the best in scientific and professional education, so originally its officials were allowed to hire on merit. But in the past several years, Dr. Hamash said, he faced increasing pressure to "Baathify" the university. He could appeal to hire a non-Baathist, but exceptions were rare.

Now he finds himself appealing for exceptions to keep Baathists. "This is a mirror image," he said with a smile.

Dr. Hamash still has his job because he left the Baath Party in 1964, a year after joining. He conceded, though, that he cooperated with security agencies and party officials to screen applicants for higher education and jobs at the university -- the files at the National Command are full of correspondence with him -- and said he never took a stance that would have put him in danger or into exile.

He criticized privately -- and publicly sent Saddam Hussein congratulatory telegrams. "Before the war, we used to say, 'If he weren't a dictator and a murderer, he would be all right,'" he said.

One challenge for the Americans is that many Iraqis still support Baathist principles as the best to uplift and modernize Iraq. Others have been shaped by three decades of propaganda delivered through state news media and party seminars.

"We didn't become members of this party for Saddam's sake," said Nassir Muhammad, 22, a political science student. "We found in this party and its aims, and what it wishes for, things we liked," particularly Arab nationalism. He hopes to go into academia, he said, to create a generation that understands that the "occupying Americans and international Zionism" are the real enemy.

Having been raised to please the powerful, others are simply transferring blind obedience to the new powers -- the Americans in some areas, hard-line Islamic groups in others. For example, Ms. Sabri, the school principal, has allowed hard-line Shiite groups to put posters of clerics in her school -- next to the Hussein-era militaristic murals -- and says she would adopt an Islamic curriculum, despite Iraq's secular character, if told to do so.

### Hearts and Minds

No policy can instantly remove Baathist elements from minds. Nor can any decree wipe out overnight the fear that the party created, as suggests the situation at the printing plant where Mr. Wan, the former prisoner of war, worked.

The plant caught the eye of Lt. Col. James Danna of the First Armored Division when its employees refused to sign a form, given to all government employees, renouncing their membership in and allegiance to the Baath Party. "They're really being defiant," he said.

Hussein Abbas, 35, said neither he, nor the 650 people he managed, nor the director general he worked for, had signed the form. "What's the use of this paper?" he asked.

It seemed to be intransigence for its own sake. But in the dim office of the director general, with the door closed, curtains drawn and anonymity guaranteed, things became clearer. In truth, the director general said, he had signed the form, and he believed that all of his employees had too. Officials with the American-led civilian administration knew this, he said, even if the American military did not.

But no one would ever publicly admit signing the form, he said. They were too frightened of vengeful Baathists.

"I cannot provide 19,000 people with security," he said.

One of his colleagues had recently received a note threatening death if he continued working with the Americans. The director general had begun driving his car himself because he no longer trusted his driver.

"We can't tell our friends from our enemies," he said in a low voice. "You cannot even trust your own children."