

Humanitarian Aid, the Handmaiden to Empire? Lessons from Contemporary Iraq
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Summarized by Timothy Doran

With respect to humanitarian aid, Dr. McIntyre asks, “What are we doing out there in the world, and are we making a difference? And if we are not, why not?”

The aid agencies say that they are doing what they do for the people who are suffering, to give them food, water, blankets, basic sanitation needs. The case of Iraq shows us the starkness of the problems. Iraq has been a humanitarian crisis for longer than the recent military fiasco. A prehistory of conflict in Iraq occurred before Americans appeared on the scene. Iraq has 18 provinces and is a complex multi-ethnic territory. There are Kurds in the North and Shia and Sunni in the South. Two brothers of the Hashemite family who created the state of Jordan became simultaneously kings of Trans-Jordan and Iraq. Iraq attained independence in 1958, accompanied by a series of coups, disruptions, and fairly violent shifts of regime.

In 1968, Ba’ath Arab Socialist Party came into power.

In 1979: Saddam became president.

In 1980: Saddam declared war on his old enemy, Iran. The war lasted until 1988.

In the 1970s, Iraq had been highly developed in terms of education and infrastructure, and had the highest percentage of female literacy in the Muslim world.

Over the course of the 1980s Iraq went from the top of development indicators to the second from the bottom. 1.5 million Iraqi men died in that conflict during those years. Yet Saddam was seen as United States ally in the region against Khomeini. We supplied Saddam with some support, technology, and chemical-biological weapons. That conference cooled off in 1986 and 1988 but because the collapse of Soviet Empire in the next year was so surprising, as seen in articles from 1989 and early 1990, no one was paying attention to what is going on in the Middle East.

Many watchers of current events puzzled over the question of what could come next in terms of global security after the decline of the Soviets. The journals (e.g. *Foreign Affairs*) did not realize that an interesting dynamic was developing in the Middle East. A massive amount of Russian-Jewish immigration was occurring in Israel. Arab leaders in the region were concerned. This was the biggest issue on their radar.

In August 1990, Saddam rolled through the Kuwaiti border, catching everyone off guard. The next day, the United Nations set sanctions on Iraq which lasted many years. A unanimous agreement was made.

The outbreak of war in 1990 had many consequences. The Ba’athist regime declared that the resisters were in Iraq’s southern marshes, which were then drained and completely environmentally destroyed in Baghdad’s harsh counterinsurgency campaign. In the mid-

1990s and after, there was a brutal internal campaign to eliminate dissent. Leftists in the United States were worried: Code Pink and other Bay Area familiar faces advocated against the sanctions in Iraq arguing that sanctions themselves are related to, and sometimes serve, the concept of empire: sanctions have existed since Peloponnesian War in the fifth century BC when Perikles, leader of Imperial Athens, prevented Megara from trading.

During the 1990s while Iraq became a major international problem, the decade was dubbed “the decade of humanitarian intervention.” Iraq, Cambodia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Eritrea, and several other nations all received humanitarian aid of some form during this period. Some of the poorest countries in the world had authoritative regimes. This was the original humanitarian case for Iraq; **the story was that the sanctions were killing Iraqi children.** Mortality figures were used to try to make this case. The problem was that no one knew exactly what was happening regarding deaths in Iraq, since most agencies making these claims had no representation in Iraq. The claim was made that infant and child mortality had been going down in Iraq until 1990 when the sanctions were placed, then a dramatic spike came in infant mortalities. The figures themselves are pretty shocking; but putting together these figures is quite difficult. The surveys on which they are based are tricky and unreliable. Inciting the public to contribute involved showing them photographs of dying children. McIntyre calls this imagery “humanitarian porn,” intended to produce a visceral reaction; this is now no longer done. In the late 1990s, Iraq and France came to a rapprochement. French oil folk were making agreements: and the same year, French humanitarian agencies were allowed to operate in Iraq. Next, the UN developed an oil-for-food program, the largest UN-led humanitarian program in the history of the UN. It consumed billions of dollars and used thousands of staff; it turned out to be totally corrupt and provided a smoke screen for the Iraqi government to engage in smuggling, which boosted its economy. Its flaws made it ripe for exploitation: it was so bureaucratic that a contract could take a year to be approved by the UN. There was no cash payment included, ignoring the fact that a person cannot eat flour: he needs to add oil, tomatoes, onions, and things like that to make basic foodstuffs edible.

Politics, economics, and the role of state is critical when gauging the usefulness of humanitarian aid agencies. It is not possible to have an agency help people but not engage in politics. At www.cia.gov it is possible to download the Duelfer report. In it the total illicit Iraqi income during the UN sanctions is shown. The Iraq survey group came to the conclusion that no evidence existed for WMDs, but the Duelfer group had sufficient information to run a postmortem analysis of Iraq as a failed state, including details on specific money moved, dirty deals on the UN Security Council, illegal cash transfers, and 11 billion dollars of off book revenue.

What can be done with well-meaning humanitarian aid agencies? Merlin, IRS, Oxfam, the World Health Organization, Save the Children, Unicef, World Vision, ADRA, WFP, and Intersos are anti-authoritarian by nature. Much of their rhetoric has a specific pedigree and is linked ideologically to a French secularism appearing around 1968. This is especially true for Medecins Sans Frontieres, formed after the Biafra debacle. The organization does good work and loves to tell its own stories, employing the rhetoric of what McIntyre calls “bally humanitarian neutrality.”

What does the situation on the ground look like for aid agencies in Iraq? The Iraqi side of border is manned by four United States Marines in a humvee. The Jordan side is manned by Jordanian soldiers. Aid agencies and news agencies pour into Iraq on one highway patrolled by pirates going above 120 miles per hour. Commerce is wild. There is no stable power structure and no police. For the police went home. The Rand Corporation wondered why it was so easy to invade Iraq. The answer is that the Iraqi army went home as our leaflets advised. 400,000 people with military training went home and shortly thereafter the insurgency started because they had no employment. Saddam had always possessed the ability to come back. The Iraqis were wary, but friendly. What were we doing there? You can ask this at multiple levels. Every humanitarian organization was ready to go to Iraq. Of the 18 billion dollars in that 2003 supplemental fund, 96% of the money set aside for reconstruction went unaccounted for. It didn't go to relief projects.

If we represent humanity and not the state, why are we so willing to mop up the state's messes? Because there is a commodity that all aid agencies are chasing. There is a **market for mercy**. Aid agencies are competing for mercy. But we do have self-interest and the humanitarian industry should admit that. Is there such a thing as an apolitical space of humanity? What are the limits and possibilities of aid?

Why do governments feel the need to go through NGO's instead of going directly? They do both. One argument was made in the late 1970s/early 1980s about the explosion of NGOs. NGOs are more efficient, the argument said. What they do better than anyone is close involvement with communities. However, having a moral argument should be no excuse for incompetence. Just because they are doing something that is morally justified, they should still be criticized if they are doing a bad job of it. The anthropologist Alex de Waal made this argument in *Famine Crimes*.

The rhetoric of humanitarianism is a useful cover for all kinds of agendas. There are claims about humanitarian needs being made by private companies, by militaries, by others. There is a self-justifying rhetoric. There is also a greater deal of interdependence between NGOs and governments. Andrew Naxios was a lieutenant colonel in the Marine corps who then became the head of World Vision, then director of USAID. That in itself is troubling. Peter Brown, in *Poverty and Leadership*, wrote about how ideas of justice and ideas of charity became part of a political rhetoric that justifies political action.

Sweet Relief is a book about Marlo, an aid worker who died in the field. She acquired 20 million dollars in aid. She was idealistic, perhaps misguided. Many of the people who do this work are very thoughtful. Aid agencies are very introspective. But their conversations with each other stay secret. If they should tell the public about their doubts about their own agencies, they are afraid the public may stop helping them. "Protect the brand and reputation of Oxfam against strategic threats" was a line in Andrew McIntyre's job description when he worked for Oxfam. Yet it does not serve humanitarian agencies to keep the public in the dark. And at the day's end, the public is not served by telling simplistic stories about what these agencies do.