



Putting Noncombatants at Risk: Saddam's Use of "Human Shields"

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Summary

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In past confrontations with the West, Iraqi President Saddam Husayn has used thousands of foreign and Iraqi civilians as human shields in bids to manipulate domestic and international opinion and deter military action against his regime. This tactic has produced clear costs and only marginal gains for Saddam, yet he repeatedly has enacted variations of it since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.

- In late 1990, Saddam held more than 800 Western, Japanese, and Kuwaiti nationals as involuntary human shields at strategic installations in Iraq and Kuwait to deter attack by the international Coalition being organized against Baghdad. Saddam refused to allow thousands of other foreigners, including women and children, whose countries had joined the Coalition to leave Iraq or Kuwait and announced that they also might be used as human shields. Saddam released these foreigners at the end of 1990, prior to the initiation of Desert Storm.
- Saddam encouraged hundreds of Iraqi families to put themselves at risk as "voluntary" human shields at palaces and strategic facilities in Iraq during a crisis in November 1997 over Iraq's refusal to allow UN inspections of sensitive government sites.

In the current crisis, Baghdad is encouraging international peace groups to send members to Iraq to serve as voluntary human shields, and the Iraqi military continues its longstanding policy of placing military assets near civilian facilities and in densely populated areas.

Discussion

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Over the past 15 years, Iraqi President Saddam Husayn has employed several variations of a "human shields" tactic in an effort to help forestall military attack or manipulate public opinion during confrontations with the UN or the West. The tactic involves placing noncombatants at or near likely military and strategic facilities to deter an attacker with the threat of collateral casualties to civilians or prisoners of war (POWs). The use of human shields violates the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which Iraq has signed.

Saddam's exploitation of this tactic has encompassed:

- The capture and forcible movement of hundreds of foreign nationals in Iraq and Kuwait to Iraqi-controlled strategic sites and the threat to use thousands of others similarly;
- The solicitation and coercion of Iraqi and foreign "volunteers" or "guests" to serve as shields at such locations; and
- The positioning of military assets in or near densely populated civilian neighborhoods and civilian facilities.

The Geneva Conventions on the Use of Human Shields

The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 prohibit the taking of hostages and ban the use of human shields through clauses that forbid a party from harming those in its control "not actively taking part in hostilities." Common Article 3 of the conventions bans the taking of hostages in internal conflicts, while the Fourth Convention forbids taking civilians hostage during times of war. The conventions also decree that both POWs and civilians should not be "used to render certain points or areas immune from military operations." Iraq is not a signatory to the two additional protocols of 1977, which address internal conflicts and also ban hostage taking.

Forcing Foreigners to Serve as Human Shields

Saddam's first and, to date, most aggressive employment of human shields occurred during Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 and the international response, Operation Desert Shield. Within hours of the start of Baghdad's invasion, Iraqi soldiers began taking hostage Western and other noncombatants they encountered as the Iraqi

military pushed toward Kuwait City. Once there, the Iraqis actively continued their arrests, even removing UK citizens from a British Airways jet that had landed on a stopover in Kuwait just as the invasion began. The Western prisoners first were moved to secret locations, according to international press reports. Within days, Iraq closed the borders of Iraq and Kuwait, turned back foreigners trying to leave, and warned publicly that nationals of countries that joined a Coalition against Iraq would be sent as human shields to key Iraqi installations, including chemical weapons factories, to deter attacks.

- By late October, the Iraqis had arrested at least 104 American and more than 700 British, European, Australian, Japanese, and Kuwaiti men and moved them to at least 30 and perhaps as many as 70 strategic sites in Iraq and Kuwait as a hedge against possible international military action. The sites included dams, refineries, steel factories, other heavy industry production facilities, agricultural sites, and suspect weapons facilities.
- Several American and British civilians used as human shields stated that the Iraqis put groups of eight to ten foreigners at each site, changing the composition of the groups and moving them to different facilities every three or four days. Although the men said they were treated fairly well by their guards because they had been termed Saddam's "special guests," they suffered severe psychological stress; most had no access to news, some were denied information on captured family members, and the Iraqis never told them what they planned to do with them. Although the men were allowed to contact their embassies and to correspond with their families, they repeatedly were returned to strategic sites.

Thousands of Americans and other Coalition nationals stranded in Iraq and Kuwait—including women and children—remained under house arrest for as long as four months with the implicit threat of being used as human shields. Saddam televised meetings with a number of these hostages to show the world how well they were being treated and to underscore their continuing vulnerability. In a further attempt at exploitation, Saddam wrote and publicized a letter to their families that explained the role of these hostages "in promoting peace" in the region. These hostages were not used explicitly as shields at strategic sites. Most reported little or no physical abuse while under house arrest. Some were unable to obtain needed medicines during their incarceration, however, and suffered long-term complications.

Iraqi soldiers and regime intelligence officers searched Kuwaiti neighborhoods for Coalition nationals throughout the occupation. Most of the Westerners and Japanese who were found were transported to Baghdad, where they were held in hotels or other facilities controlled by the Iraqi government. Press reports estimated that as many as 1,500 American, British, French, and other Coalition nationals hid themselves in Kuwait during Operation Desert Shield to avoid being used as human shields. Any Kuwaitis discovered harboring Coalition nationals were summarily executed, according to testimonies of former American hostages and human shields.

Foreign Criticism

Most nations responded with outrage to Saddam's use of foreigners as human shields. Critics blasted Saddam's action as a blatant violation of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, while Coalition partners condemned the move and made clear that they would not back away from military engagement because of it. Between 18 August and 25 September 1990, the United Nations Security Council passed four resolutions that condemned Iraq for holding foreign nationals against their will. The resolutions declared that Baghdad was responsible for their safety and demanded their immediate release.

As Saddam recognized the growing cost of his policy, he began to free a few hostages and human shields in a controlled bid to regain international credibility and exacerbate divisions over planned Coalition action. At first, Saddam released hostages primarily on humanitarian grounds, owing to their health or age, in response to official or personal appeals from foreign representatives. He soon expanded his "largesse" to nationals of countries sympathetic to Iraq. Iraqi officials also tried to entice Japan and other countries to abandon their support for the UN-imposed economic sanctions against Iraq by offering to free their nationals held hostage. Saddam and other Iraqi officials issued similar public offers to release all foreign hostages on the condition that Coalition forces not attack Iraq. On December 6, a little more than a month before the start of Operation Desert Storm, Baghdad announced that all foreigners could depart unconditionally. Almost all did within a matter of days.

Threatening POWs

Despite the negative publicity that his human shields policy generated, once the Coalition began its military response, Operation Desert Storm, Saddam again threatened its use—against coalition POWs. In a 21 January 1991 broadcast on Baghdad Radio, an Iraqi military spokesman announced that Iraq would use the 20 or so Coalition POWs—Americans, British, French, and Saudis—as human shields at "scientific, economic, and other selected targets." The military spokesman stated that the action was one of the government's measures to counter "unjust" Coalition air attacks against "civilian, economic, and scientific targets" inside Iraqi cities, attacks which had resulted in the death and injury of Iraqi civilians. The next day, an Iraqi Presidential spokesman described the locations where the POWs were to be placed as "military targets."

- Debriefings of returned US and British POWs indicated that Saddam did not follow through on this threat, probably again owing to the strongly negative international response it generated.
- Saddam reportedly had harbored even more elaborate plans to use Coalition POWs as human shields. Former Iraqi Army General Wafiq al-Samarra'i, who fled Iraq in late 1994, told the British press that at the start of the Gulf War Saddam had ordered his generals to capture some 5,000 British and American soldiers for use as human shields. The general said Saddam planned to tie the men to the front of advancing tanks to protect Iraqi soldiers who would attempt a ground assault on Saudi oilfields.

Manipulating Iraqi and Foreign “Volunteers”

Saddam has continued to employ variations of this policy in subsequent periods of tension with the West—but in ways that cost him less politically. One approach has been to encourage or coerce Iraqi civilians and foreign peace activists to serve as “volunteer” human shields at Iraqi strategic sites during periods of increased tension with the UN and the United States.

In mid-November 1997, Saddam enticed or coerced thousands of Iraqi men, women, and children to volunteer as human shields at his presidential palaces and Iraqi industrial sites. Iraq’s refusal to allow UN officials to conduct weapons inspections at a number of sensitive sites in the greater Baghdad area precipitated a new crisis as the month began. On 10 November, Saddam opened one of the Baghdad palaces to Iraqi families who reportedly had offered to stay there to defy any Coalition attack. Normally, such facilities are closed to the public. The next day scores of Iraqis followed suit, and by mid-November hundreds of Iraqi families were serving as human shields at some 80 palaces and industrial facilities across central Iraq.

Then-Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Said al-Sahaf told the international media that the actions of the families were “voluntary...expressing the real feelings of the Iraqis,” but he acknowledged that Baghdad would encourage such acts to continue. According to Western press reports, many Iraqis had been lured into volunteering by the promise of extra food rations, and a number of the human shields received free meals at the sites. Credible reports from Iraqis later stated that local Ba’th party operatives had coerced a number of citizens into participating as a demonstration of their loyalty to Saddam after Iraqi officials had determined that there were not enough “willing” volunteers. In December 1997, Saddam permitted UN inspectors into several of the suspect weapons sites, and the Iraqi human shield volunteers dispersed.

- About ten weeks later a leading Baghdad newspaper called on Iraqis again to volunteer as human shields. The call was issued late in the January-February 1998 crisis caused by Saddam’s attempts to deny UN inspectors access to suspect sites near his palaces. Baghdad expected key facilities to be attacked as a result, but Saddam and UN Secretary General Annan resolved the impasse a few days later before volunteers had mobilized.

Saddam also has tried to exploit the support of foreign activists and legislators for the Iraqi people by encouraging members of various groups to serve as human shield volunteers.

- During the same early 1998 inspections crisis, Saddam responded positively to separate offers by visiting Russian parliamentarians and a group of Italian pacifists to protect Iraqi sites. The foreign volunteers stayed in hotels in Baghdad and never deployed to military or strategic targets. The crisis ended shortly thereafter without military action.

- In September 2002, Iraq convened the semi-annual Baghdad Peace Conference two months early to promote ideas, including the formation of an international brigade of human shields, to prevent US-led military action against Iraq. Iraqi Deputy Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz chaired the conference; attendees consisted primarily of international peace groups and activists.
- In response to a proposal made by an official of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command in October 2002 for thousands of Arab citizens to volunteer as human shields in Iraq, Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz noted that “Western and US delegations regularly make similar proposals to us.” The initiative was raised at a regional solidarity conference for Iraq held in Damascus.
- Baghdad Television prominently reports such offers by foreign groups.

Putting Iraqi Civilians and Civilian Facilities at Risk

In another “lower-cost” approach, Saddam has regularly imposed involuntary service as human shields on Iraqi citizens by authorizing the placement of high-value military units and equipment in heavily populated civilian neighborhoods and near civilian facilities,



such as mosques, markets, schools, and cultural sites. The tactic is designed to conceal these military assets but also to deter—or, failing that, to capitalize on—Coalition attacks on them through the high likelihood of collateral civilian casualties.

- Over the past decade, Baghdad has positioned SAMs and air defense equipment near dozens of mosques and other civilian facilities in the no-fly zones.



- Iraq's military often uses such civilian installations as residences and schools as alternate command and control facilities during periods of heightened tensions, and Saddam frequently commandeers private apartments or homes in densely populated areas for his personal use during a crisis. Although it is unclear whether civilians are permitted to remain in commandeered facilities, Saddam presumably uses this tactic because he believes that Coalition forces would not target such facilities for attack.
- In 1996, Iraq admitted to UNSCOM officials that it had concealed bacterial growth media purchased for its BW program in the Asma School in Hindiyah in 1991. Growth media from the BW program also was found in a warehouse and store used to distribute pharmaceuticals and medical supplies to both Iraqi civilians and the Iraqi military.



Seeking Propaganda Victories: Saddam and the Al-Firdus Bunker Bombing

Iraq's public response to the several hundred deaths from the Coalition bombing of a military bunker in Baghdad during Operation Desert Storm illustrates the high priority Saddam places on exploiting the propaganda value of civilian casualties. Iraqi officials have never acknowledged culpability in permitting large numbers of civilians to seek shelter in a military bunker that US military officials stated was a Coalition military target.

- During the night of 12-13 February 1991, as part of an air assault on Baghdad Coalition forces bombed an underground military bunker in the Al-Firdus section of the city. Iraqi officials alleged that the facility served only as a civilian bomb shelter and reported that at least 293 people—mainly women and children—were killed in the attack. Baghdad labeled the bombing a “slaughter” that demonstrated the callous disregard of Coalition forces for Iraqi lives. Over the next several days local and foreign media gave extensive coverage to the recovery of bodies.
- The facility had been built as a bomb shelter in the early 1980s but radio intercepts, reconnaissance photos, and other sources indicated that the site had been converted to a military command-and-control facility with no indication whether civilians were inside the night of the bombing. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak accused Saddam of having “put innocent civilians at military locations to serve as human shields.”
- Foreign military analysts told reporters that the facility might have been a two-level, dual-use facility, with a military center built below a civilian bomb shelter. Some analysts speculated that the bunker might have served as a civilian shelter for the families of Iraqi military officers and government officials.

The Current Crisis

Saddam already is employing some variations of his human shields tactic in anticipation of a possible military confrontation with a US-led coalition. These steps are consistent with Saddam's behavior during past crises, when he has attempted to maintain a broad range of political and diplomatic options through which to play up divisions at the Security Council and among Coalition partners.

- The Iraqis have constructed new military revetments for armored equipment adjacent to schools, mosques, food warehouses, and civilian housing areas in numerous populated areas.
- A senior member of Iraq's Ba'th Party told a Western press service on 22 December that Baghdad was preparing to receive an unspecified number of Arab volunteers who would be deployed as human shields at “sensitive sites likely to be targeted in US strikes.”