

Arab Migrants Fear For Their Future

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The former Iraqi president may have been reviled by the international community, but he won the admiration of millions of economic migrants.

Although brutal to his own citizens, Saddam Hussein frequently accorded other Arab nationals living in Iraq far better treatment than they ever would have enjoyed in their own countries.

Little wonder that some Palestinians, Sudanese, Egyptians and others are struggling to understand why so many Iraqis hated their leader. And unsurprisingly, some of these other Arab nationals also wonder about their future in the new Iraq.

“We loved Saddam because we thought that the majority of the people here loved him,” said tobacconist Abdel Rab Shaaban. “There were huge festivities on his birthday, and on the anniversary of the [Ba’ath] party’s founding.”

But Abdel already sees disturbing signs of change. “We never used to feel like strangers here, but now we are required to fill in residency forms.”

In the Eighties, Iraq suffered from a huge labour shortage caused by the demands of its ten-year war with Iran. Some four million Arabs of other nationalities were estimated to be working in Iraq at the time – around half of them Egyptian.

Saddam Hussein played on Iraq’s popularity as a labour market to bolster his credibility as a pan-Arab leader, in line with his Ba’athist ideology.

Iraq placed few restrictions on migrant workers – unlike other labour-importing Arab states, which sometimes regards foreign workers as both a security risk and a drain on social services. In contrast, Iraq opened its schools – including its military academy – to fellow-Arabs.

Technically, Arab citizens were required to fill out residency forms, but this regulation was rarely followed up.

Many Arabs continued to make Iraq their home even after Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the imposition of United Nations sanctions, which crippled the Iraqi economy.

Today, however, Arab residents in Baghdad claim that the atmosphere has changed completely.

Police have begun going door to door in neighbourhoods such as downtown’s Saadoun market district, which is home to a large community of Egyptians and Sudanese.

Combined with rising crime and political insecurity, the police patrols have raised fears among expatriates – many of them political refugees from their own countries – that they will no longer be able to remain in Iraq.

Jamal al-Sharif, who runs a grocery store, came to Iraq 15 years ago after experiencing difficulties with the authorities in his native Sudan.

“I found myself among my people here. I worked and travelled with freedom. But now we fear for the future,” Jamal said.

Othman Qamr, a Sudanese air conditioner repairman who also lives in Saadoun, said, “We used to stay out late at night, and send our children to school without fear.”

Now, he claims that “police go in and out of houses and hotels, looking for those who carry out attacks” against the occupying troops.

For many of Iraq’s Palestinians, the former president’s capture has been particularly hard to bear, as many – particularly militants of pro-Iraqi factions – served Saddam on intelligence missions or in special commando units on the Iranian front.

In return, they were granted privileged status by the former president, living in modern apartment complexes in west Baghdad’s upscale Haifa Street, and receiving free medical treatment and pensions.

After the war, however, the Palestinians’ perceived affinity with Saddam has left them unpopular and vulnerable.

Neighbours, anxious to acquire what was often considered prime real estate, have since expelled hundreds of Palestinian families from their homes at gunpoint. Many have since spent months in a refugee camp along the Jordanian border.

Palestinians also feel they lost a man whom many considered to be the only Arab leader who cared about their cause.

“The Palestinian people considered Iraq to be their main base, thanks to the support of Saddam Hussein, who surpassed the other Arab leaders in his love for [us],” said Makki al-Nasri, who was a fighter with a Palestinian group in the Seventies. “He gave grants to the wounded, and treated us in hospital. I cannot criticise the hospitality that Saddam offered us, even if others say otherwise,” he added.

Still, Saddam’s eventual capture has changed his formerly heroic status in the eyes of numerous Arab nationals living in Iraq, just as it opened the eyes of Iraqis.

Many of today’s migrants arrived in Iraq when Saddam, holding the front line against the Iranian revolution, was still viewed as the one upstanding hero of the Arab world.

“We supported the former president, so much so that we volunteered to fight against Iran,” said Egyptian Abdel Rahim Mahmoud. “We believed that he had the support of the whole world.”

But many former supporters feel the heroic Saddam eventually proved a coward by meekly surrendering to his former adversary, the United States.

“I felt sure that the former president would never be taken, only his dead body,” said Mahmoud, adding that Saddam’s sons Uday and Qusai, who died in a firefight with US troops, were “braver”.

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