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# THREATS AND RESPONSES: THE IRAQI LEADER; Hussein's Obsession: An Empire of Mosques

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For a glimpse into Saddam Hussein's cast of mind as he weighs the threat of another war with the United States, there are few more revealing places to look than the Mother of All Battles Mosque, a vast, newly constructed edifice of gleaming white limestone and blue mosaic that the Iraqi leader oversaw from blueprint to completion on Baghdad's western outskirts.

First, the minarets.

The outer four, each 140 feet high, were built to resemble the barrels of Kalashnikov rifles, pointing skyward. The inner four, each 120 feet high, look like the Scud missiles that Iraq fired at Israel in 1991 during the Mother of All Battles, known to Americans as the Persian Gulf war. At their peak, these inner minarets are decorated with red, white and black Iraqi flags.

There is more.

Inside a special sanctum, treated by the mosque's custodian with the reverence due a holy of holies, there are 650 pages of the Koran -- written, it is said, in Mr. Hussein's blood. As the official legend has it, ''Mr. President'' donated 28 liters of his blood -- about 50 pints -- over two years, and a famous calligrapher, Abas al-Baghdadi, mixed it with ink and preservatives to produce the handsome writing now laid out page by page in glass-walled display cases.

A reflecting pool that encircles the mosque is shaped like the map of the Arab world. At the far end, a blue mosaic plinth sits like an island in the clear water. The plinth is a reproduction of Mr. Hussein's thumbprint, and atop is a stylized reproduction, in gold, of his Arabic initials. In this, as in all else, no expense has been spared. Officials put the cost of the mosque, in a country where many families live in abject poverty on $10 or $15 a month, at $7.5 million.

Mosque-building -- on a scale, Iraqi officials say, that no Arab leader has undertaken since the days of the great Abbasid caliphs who ruled the Arab world from Baghdad until the middle of the 13th century -- has become Mr. Hussein's grand obsession. He has set out to make Baghdad the undisputed center of Islamic architecture, as it was under the Abbasids, and the only thing that has stopped him from building even bigger, the officials say, is a concern not to outstrip the Islamic holy places in Mecca, in Saudi Arabia.

A few miles from the Mother of All Battles Mosque, two others are rising that will dwarf it. One five times the size, with many similar features in celebration of Mr. Hussein, is to be known as the Mosque of Saddam the Great. It is visible in skeleton form on the bulldozed plain that used to be Baghdad's airport, and is due to be completed in 2015. A mile or two beyond, in a gigantic cluster of domes that seem borrowed from the design book for Las Vegas, is the Al-Rahman Mosque, meaning ''the most merciful,'' heading for completion in 2004.

Part of the message the Iraqi leader is sending with his mosque-building is that he, Saddam Hussein, is the natural leader of an Arab world yearning for past glories under the banner of Islam that fluttered atop the Arab armies that conquered much of the ancient world after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632. But the lesson encoded in the Mother of All Battles Mosque, or Umm al-Mahare, as it is called in Arabic, seems to be much narrower, and aimed like its Kalashnikov-and-Scud minarets at a more selected audience: the United States.

With United Nations weapons inspectors now heading out every morning with powers to search the secret laboratories and weapons-making plants that were at the heart of Mr. Hussein's ambitions to turn Iraq into the Arab superpower, the Iraqi leader has had to do something that he says outright, in almost every speech, he abhors having had to do: bow down before the power of the outside world, led by the United States. On several occasions recently, the Iraqi leader has spoken of his concern that Iraqis -- meaning himself, as the country's absolute ruler -- not be seen to be ''weaklings'' and ''cowards.''

But along with this, there has been another message, and it is the one written in stone and marble at the Mother of All Battles Mosque: That Iraqis are natural warriors, that they search ceaselessly for what Mr. Hussein called last week ''the great meanings inside themselves,'' and that they are like coiled springs waiting for the moment of ''anger and revolt'' when they can avenge the wrongs done them by their enemies. In short, that they are ready for war, as Mr. Hussein said at a cabinet meeting this week, when he told his generals ''that your heads will remain high with honor, God willing, and your enemy will be defeated.''

To Americans, and to many Arabs, it might seem chimerical that Mr. Hussein could present himself as a man who has brought Iraq glory in war.

Iraq's eight-year war with Iran in the 1980's ended in a battlefield stalemate, no ground gained, with at least 500,000 Iraqis, and as many Iranians, dead. The Persian Gulf war, which was triggered by Mr. Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, ended after six weeks of American bombing and less than 72 hours of land warfare, and the abiding image, for Americans, of Iraqi soldiers scrambling out of desert bunkers with their hands raised in surrender to American troops.

But at the Mother of All Battles Mosque, the inescapable message is that Mr. Hussein wants Iraqis to think of the battle for Kuwait as a glorious chapter in their history, one they should be ready to re-live if America once again chooses to launch its missiles and bombs and tanks at Iraq. Seen through this perspective, the gulf war was a victory, not a defeat, for Iraq, and its people should welcome a new chance to follow Mr. Hussein if the time comes to land a new punch on America's nose.

Many who know Iraq, and the United States, and can make even a layman's estimate of their relative military strengths, would regard this as illusionism of a piece with Iraq's persistence in holding onto Kuwait in 1990 under American threats, and boasting of certain victory, until the denouement. What is harder to say, given the closed nature of Iraq under Mr. Hussein, is whether it is an illusionism like Winston Churchill's in 1940, baying at the Nazi armies in France while knowing that Britain's land forces were in no shape to repel an invasion, or whether it is something much grimmer for Iraq, the failure of a leader who lives in a tightly protected seclusion to grasp the realities that press in keenly on others.

Although Mr. Hussein is said to have visited the mosque frequently during its construction, lending himself to the project as a kind of architect-in-chief, in the way that Mao in China and Kim Il Sung in North Korea used to do with every hospital and bridge and dam, officials at the mosque say that they have not seen him there since before the mosque opened last year on April 28, Mr. Hussein's birthday. The absence of ''Mr. President'' on the day of the opening was a striking lacuna they attribute to the heavy demands on the Iraqi leader's time. ''Perhaps he was too busy,'' they say.

But the imam at the mosque, the chief cleric, is pleased to tell reporters what he believes Mr. Hussein had in mind with the mosque. What he says comes as no surprise.

Was the mosque a symbol of Iraq's defeat of America in the gulf war, he was asked.

''Exactly, you have divined it well,'' said Sheik Thahir Ibrahim al-Shammari, his face shining with a look of something like beatitude.

But was this not stretching a point a little, he was asked, given the fact that Iraqi troops fled the battlefield in Kuwait so fast.

The imam smiled. He had heard the questions before, and fielding them was to him about as easy as batting away a child's softball pitches.

''Well,'' he said, coming back at his questioner with the cleric's equivalent of a sucker punch, ''I am not, of course, a military man. I am not a man to speak of battles, won or lost. But the building of this mosque, and other mosques, what is that if not a victory? The resistance Iraqis have shown to 12 years of American aggression, what is that if not a victory? No, what you see here is decidedly a monument to victory, define that as you will.''

One thing the mosque's keepers appear to have learned from meeting reporters is that the architectural flourishes -- the Kalashnikov minarets and the Scud-like towers beside them -- may be a little over the top for the Western taste. Accordingly, the presentation has changed.

Where once visitors were told what seems obvious -- how the elegant cylinders of the inner minarets slim to an aerodynamic peak, like a ballistic missile tapering at the nose cone -- they are now assured that no such references were ever in the architects' minds.

But there is no such reticence about the features that memorialize Mr. Hussein. Sheik Shammari was happy to run through the details:

The outer minarets 43 meters in height, for the 43 days of American bombing at the start of the gulf war. Then inner minarets, 37 meters in height, for the year 1937; numbering 4, for the fourth month, April; and 28 water jets in the pool beneath the minarets, for the 28th day -- all in all, the 37-4-28, for April 28, 1937, Mr. Hussein's birthday.

The mosque is one of the few buildings in Iraq where there is no portrait of Mr. Hussein. But more striking than that, there is no memorial, within the mosque, for the 100,000 Iraqis the government says died from American bombing during the gulf war. Few independent experts who have studied the 1991 bombing campaign consider the figure remotely credible, but, in any case, the war's Iraqi victims go unheralded.

Outside, in the mosque's spacious grounds, there is a memorial to the dead of the Iran-Iraq war, but that, too, seems more a paean to victory than an acknowledgment of suffering. Alongside heroic, Soviet-style figures of ordinary men, women and children carved into the white limestone, there is a quotation from Mr. Hussein's message on the occasion of the cease-fire with Iran in August 1988, describing the moment as ''a great day, a day of days.''

The seeming lack of a human dimension was underscored on Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, by the fact that the mosque was all but deserted at the height of the day, apparently because ordinary Iraqis prefer to gather in large numbers at the lovely old mosques in the center of Baghdad.

Sheik Shammari said that 2,500 people had attended the noonday prayers, at which he had called for ''God's mercy'' on Palestinian suicide bombers -- a favorite topic of Mr. Hussein, who has promised cash payments of $25,000 to the family of every Palestinian blowing up himself, and Israelis. But mainly, he said, he had spoken of the certainty of Iraq's victory over the United States.

''I told them, 'Our enemy has very advanced weapons, and in this they are stronger than we are,' '' he said. ''But I also said, 'But we also have weapons that they do not have. We have our faith, Islam, and we have our great leader-president, Saddam Hussein. These are weapons far stronger than anything our enemy has.' ''

Incongruously, for a cleric of a mosque that seems political to the peak of its dome, the sheik said he preferred not to speak of politics.

But then he thought it over, and could not resist.

There was a president, he said, without mentioning any country, who was ''steeped in the blood'' of Iraqis, and who had a ''crazy, paranoid'' vision of the world that was driving him on to war, regardless of the sufferings it would bring.

''If we want to be merciful, we would call him a Satan,'' he said. ''He has absolutely no sense of reality, none at all.''

He was speaking of President Bush.