**1016- ARTICLE**

*Article Content*

# THREATS AND RESPONSES: REPARATIONS; A Cadillac and Other Plunder: Iraq-Kuwait Issue Resurfaces

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The car is Ali's pride and joy.

In New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, it would be a head-turner: a mid-1950's Cadillac, jet black, mint condition, equipped as for a movie star or head of state, with barely 5,500 miles on the clock and chrome-trimmed tail fins to make a bobbysoxer weep.

In Baghdad's traffic-clogged streets, it is a sensation, drawing waves and even handshakes through open windows at almost every traffic light.

With Ali grandly at the wheel, a passenger invited for a ride can raise the glass partition between the driver and the living room-sized rear, push back on the gray velour seats, adjust the air-conditioning, and picture himself an oil-blessed emir of the 1950's.

But Ali's idyll is flawed, Iraqis grown weary of Saddam Hussein's rule whisper, by the car's corrupted history -- a history, these Iraqis say, that reflects the ways Iraq itself has been flawed by a generation of harsh autocracy at home, by the absence of anything approximating the rule of law and by the warfare and plunder that Iraq has waged against its neighbors.

Ali's car, these Iraqis say, was part of the booty Iraq took from Kuwait during the seven-month occupation that was ended by American troops in 1991.

On first acquaintance, Ali told a stranger admiring the Cadillac on a parking lot near the Tigris River that it had been bought new by his grandfather, a wealthy Baghdad merchant.

Others have been told that Ali bought the car at a 1996 Baghdad auction for $6,200. In any case, Ali says, he would not take $1 million for it, even on his monthly salary of about $50, and he would kill anybody trying to steal it.

''I would pull out my Remington, and shoot,'' he said, smiling broadly.

But Ali's co-workers, some resentful of his prize, say the Cadillac was part of the plunder from Kuwait. Like much else the Iraqis stole, these men say, the car was among the gifts disbursed to Mr. Hussein's favored acolytes after the occupation ended with Iraqi troops in headlong flight, many of them driving stolen cars. Some of these gifts were later sold. His colleagues disagree about whether he bought the car or was given it.

At an official registry in Kuwait of the booty Iraq seized, officials confirmed after checking records that the 29,440 privately owned cars listed as stolen during the occupation, at an audited total of $245,896,147, included a host of Cadillacs -- one a black 1955 model with low mileage, just like Ali's. The registry, citing confidentiality, will not discuss something else asserted by Ali's colleagues in Baghdad -- that the Cadillac was taken from the garage of one of the Kuwaiti royal family's palaces

With the prospect of a new war between the United States and Iraq, the record in dealing with the legacy of the Kuwait occupation has assumed a new significance. Partly this was because Iraq, eager to improve its image in the Arab world and to win a wider circle of friends in showdown votes at the United Nations, has been telling Kuwait it wants to address issues of missing persons and stolen property that it has shunned for years.

But many might say Iraq's years of ignoring Security Council resolutions demanding an accounting of Kuwait's losses and the professed eagerness to tackle these issues now, has a wider resonance, going to the heart of the current crisis with the United States. At base, the issue now is truth: whether Mr. Hussein's government, in confronting allegations that it has secret weapons programs, can show an honesty now that many who have dealt with Iraq in recent years, including weapons inspectors and Kuwaiti officials, have found lacking.

In this context, Kuwaiti officials believe, Iraq's dealings with Kuwait may contain important clues.

''Saddam's in a corner now, and he's trying to show the world, 'Look, we're cooperating in every way we can,' '' said Abdul Hamid al-Awadhi, director of the Kuwait Foreign Ministry's international organizations department, which deals with Iraq on the missing people and property. ''But all they are doing is propaganda, for the consumption of the Arab masses, to show that they are innocents, to show that it is they who are going all out for peace. In reality, they are offering nothing.''

In Kuwait, the Public Authority for the Assessment of Damages Resulting from Iraqi Aggression lists Kuwait's losses during the seven-month occupation, ending with American troops' entry into Kuwait City on Feb. 28, 1991, at $173 billion. That includes about $100 billion for ''public losses,'' including palaces, museums, power stations and other installations firebombed by the Iraqis as they fled; $18 billion for environmental damage from torched oil wells, punctured oil pipelines and oil tankers the Iraqis scuttled in Kuwait Bay; and $8 billion for private claims, like wrecked homes, cars, jewelry and artwork.

Under a reparations system imposed by the United Nations Security Council, Kuwait has recovered $16 billion so far, from a fund that is built on a mandatory 25 percent deduction from Iraqi oil revenues. The United Nations agency that reviews Kuwait's claims has so far approved $34 billion in restitution payments to Kuwait and $9 billion more for other claimants. But with Iraq's oil sales averaging less than $10 billion a year since the mid-1990's, there has not been enough reparation money to keep pace.

For Kuwait, it is still more distressing that families there have waited more than a decade for an accounting from Iraq on 605 Kuwaitis and foreign residents of Kuwait who disappeared after being seized in mass roundups by Mr. Hussein's troops. Iraq says it lost track of the prisoners in the confusion of the withdrawal and during an ensuing uprising among Iraq's Shiite Muslim population around Basra, an Iraqi city near Kuwait.

In 11 years, Kuwaiti officials say, Iraq claims to have traced only one of the missing Kuwaitis, a taxi driver last seen at the border on the morning the Iraqis invaded, Aug. 2, 1990. His bones were ''discovered'' in a Basra cemetery in 1996 and returned in a plastic bag.

The list of the missing is so diffuse, in terms of ages and professions, it could have been plucked from the Kuwait telephone directory. ''There are 14-year-old boys on the list and 70-year-old men,'' said Ibrahim Majed al-Shahin, a Kuwaiti architect who is chairman of a government-appointed committee on the missing, and whose twin 21-year-old nephews are among those for whom Iraq has not accounted.

Dr. Shahin, a 54-year-old University of Pennsylvania graduate, shakes his head when asked why Iraqi security officials, soldiers and prison guards acted as they did.

''It's like the Nazis,'' he said. ''It's a story of ordinary people in whom something primitive rises to the surface, to the point when they are not ordinary people any more. What they did here, they did to neighbors, to fellow Muslims. How did they justify any of it to themselves? What do they think now when they look at themselves in the mirror?''

For years, the Iraqis shunned all Kuwaiti appeals on the missing.

Yuli P. Vorontsov, a former Soviet ambassador to the United Nations appointed in the 1990's as a special United Nations envoy on the issue, was ignored by the Iraqis, unable to get a visa to travel to Baghdad. Two weeks ago, he was invited to come as soon as possible, even though Iraq continues to say it has no trace of the missing people. New talks on the issue are expected to begin in Amman, Jordan, early in the new year.

At the same time, Iraqi officials began, in recent weeks, to return some of the missing property on Kuwait's list. In October, Iraqi officials, who had promised to return Kuwait's state archives, escorted a fleet of trucks to the demilitarized zone between Iraq and Kuwait and handed over more than 1,000 cardboard boxes and 200 rice sacks filled with papers. But according to Mr. Awadhi, the Foreign Ministry official, none of the documents could be qualified as archives.

What Kuwait especially wanted, he said, was essential state documents, including international treaties, and papers relating to Kuwait's emergence from a Bedouin fief in the 18th-century to an independent state in 1961. That history is disputed by Mr. Hussein, who based the 1990 invasion on a claim that Kuwait was properly Iraq's 19th province.

''What the Iraqis gave us was a confused mass of death certificates, old identity cards and daily correspondence,'' Mr. Awadhi said.

''There was nothing at all from the Emiri Diwan,'' he said referring to the secretariat of Kuwait's ruler, Sheik Jabir al-Ahmad al-Jabir as-Sabah. ''Everything that you might call the memory of the state was gone. This only goes to show that Iraq's purpose is to show that Kuwait has no history, or that the only history that matters is Iraqi history showing Kuwait to be part of Iraq.''

Kuwait was no more pleased with a batch of Kuwaiti-owned artworks that Iraq said it had discovered in second-hand shops in Baghdad and returned on Dec. 21. Kuwaiti officials hoped to retrieve some high-value items on its list, including Old Masters paintings, and some by modern artists like Picasso. Valuable Islamic carpets, some spotted by the Kuwaitis on the floors of Mr. Hussein's palaces during his television appearances, were also high on the Kuwaiti wanted list.

Kuwaiti officials say they have tracked some of those items in recent years to some of the swankest auction houses in London, Paris and New York, where the Iraqis, according to the Kuwaitis, have tried to market some of the most valuable of the looted items.

But when the Iraqis arrived in the demilitarized zone, they brought no Old Masters, no Picassos, no antique Islamic carpets, no gold or silver cutlery or tableware. Instead, there were about a dozen lots, much of it bric-a-brac that would hardly have been missed from the royal palaces.

The items, arrayed days later in Mr. Awadhi's office, included a group of nondescript European oils, some badly stained. There were paintings of a Dutch windmill; women coyly attired in a Turkish bath; and one that was listed on Iraq's inventory as a depiction of churches ''by an artist from the socialist-bloc countries'' of Eastern Europe.

The haul also included chinaware from the table of the emir of Kuwait, bearing the royal insignia; several ceremonial guns and rifles donated to the emir by visiting royalty; and a carpet donated to the emir, bearing the emir's portrait, by the shah of Iran.

Until now, the issue of Iraq's unsettled debts to Kuwait has been mainly a concern of the United Nations agencies involved, and the aggrieved Kuwaitis. But Iraqi opposition groups meeting this month in London to lay plans for a post-Hussein government included a demand for an end to Iraqi reparations, saying a new government should not be crippled by having to meet penalties incurred by Mr. Hussein. Kuwait's rulers have rejected the demand outright, saying they will insist on Kuwait's right, as sanctioned by Security Council resolutions, to restitution in full.

''I don't think that the United Nations or any country right now can just say, 'Let's just forgive Iraq for what it's done,' '' said Dr. Adel Omar Assem, director general of the agency that maintains the register of all Kuwait's claims. ''It's not that Kuwait will be unsympathetic to Iraq's needs for rebuilding, but it doesn't mean that we will waive our rights.

''People should remember that the Security Council resolutions dealing with this issue did not attach this liability to Saddam Hussein, or the government of Iraq,'' he continued. ''They attached it to the Republic of Iraq.''

***Correction:*** *Jan. 4, 2003*

*An article on Monday about booty taken by Iraq from Kuwait in 1991 misstated the year of a black Cadillac that may once have belonged to Kuwaiti royalty and is now turning heads in Baghdad. It was a 1962 model, not a 1955.*