

# GulfWire

---

## Perspectives



March 31, 2003

### **IRAQ: WEIGHING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNEXPECTED**

By  
John Duke Anthony

#### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

Regional News Network's Richard French interviewed GulfWire publisher Dr. John Duke Anthony on March 25 on developments in the war against Iraq. RNN's estimated three million viewers are located primarily in the markets of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. The interview appeared on the network's "War with Iraq" show which airs nightly from seven to nine in the evening. An edited and unofficial transcript of portions of the interview follows.

Patrick W. Ryan  
Editor-in-Chief, GulfWire

---

**RNN:** Dr. Anthony, US troops in Iraq are closing in on Baghdad. How likely is Iraq to use chemical weapons against the American forces?

**JDA:** No one can say. What one can say is that, in the 1920s, Iraq declared its adherence to a treaty banning the use of such weapons. In so doing, it attached a proviso indicating that, in the event of a war being waged against Iraq, it reserved the right to use whatever means necessary to defend the country's sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity.

**RNN:** How's that significant in the current context?

**JDA:** The Iraqis are reported to have used such weapons twice before. Both times were during the long Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from September 28, 1980 until August 18, 1988. On one occasion, the weapons were allegedly used against Iranian forces that threatened to break through Iraqi defense lines protecting Baghdad. Nearer the end of the war, they were used in northern Iraq against the country's Kurdish population, among whom Iraqi officials claimed at

the time were elements aiding Iran. [In the past two months, the New York Times published an op-ed piece by former CIA analyst, Dr. Stephen Pelletier, on this subject. He noted a report within the agency subsequent to this incident in which there was conflicting information as to whether Iran or Iran and Iraq both used gas then.]

My frame of reference for what Iraqis have said on this topic is as a member of Congressional delegations that visited Iraq during the war itself and in the period afterwards prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. On those occasions, the Iraqi Vice-President, several cabinet members, and other Iraqi officials indicated that Iraq had made its reservations very clear in signing the earlier treaty dealing with gas and chemical weapons.

There was a considerable outcry in the United States in response to the use of such weapons during the Iran-Iraq war. However, at the time, none of the US officials with whom I met in Baghdad or in the United States disputed the Iraqi version.

**RNN:** How might they use such weapons this time?

**JDA:** Two possible ways would be either by aircraft or artillery. Until now, however, it is questionable whether they would use their aircraft to do so. In the conflict thus far, none of the country's reported 250 or so aircraft have been used.

**RNN:** Why haven't they used their aircraft?

**JDA:** I don't know. It could be that the leadership has concluded that, were they to be used, they would be quickly destroyed by superior American weaponry. Certainly, US satellite imagery is likely to have a very good picture as to where they are. In the 1991 war to reverse Iraq's aggression against Kuwait, many of Iraq's aircraft were transferred to neighboring Iran. After the war, Iran refused to return the aircraft, claiming them as partial down payment against claims for damages by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.

**RNN:** But why might they use such weapons at all?

**JDA:** No one can say for sure or even that they will. Were they to do so, it could be as a desperate effort to avert the regime's defeat.

**RNN:** How so?

**JDA:** The military commanders who would order their use might conclude that the regime's defeat is imminent. For that reason, they might decide to bring down as many of the enemy with them as possible - a Samson-like act, if you will.

**RNN:** But it seems there is no way the regime in Baghdad can win. Saddam is certain to be killed or overthrown and the regime defeated. Don't you agree? Is any other outcome possible?

**JDA:** You state the likely result quite clearly. Yet, until and unless it happens, anything is

possible. That is, it doesn't happen until it happens.

**RNN:** But what else could happen instead?

**JDA:** No one can say with certainty. It remains to be seen how long the war will take and what the human and related costs will be. It remains to be seen whether Saddam changes his mind and tries to flee to another country. It remains to be seen whether the regime will fight to the last person, opting, in a sense, to end its days in a "Custer's Last Stand," or an Alamo. It remains to be seen whether the United States will have to go into Baghdad and fight neighborhood by neighborhood, block by block, and house to house.

**RNN:** What would be some alternative scenarios?

**JDA:** The regime could conclude that the certain destruction of the country's capital and many of its people and resources would be reason enough to capitulate or reverse its stated unwillingness to surrender peacefully. It could conclude that between choosing to cause further death and devastation, on one hand, and going down in history as having confronted the invader and held out for as long as possible, on the other, the latter option might be the better choice, however remote the prospects for it may be at the present.

**RNN:** But how might that happen?

**JDA:** It could happen in any number of ways. As a means of preventing the US forces from entering Baghdad, Saddam, or one or the other or both of his sons, or some other credible high-ranking official, could declare surrender at any moment. This could happen prior to any entry of US forces into Baghdad. Indeed, it could happen so as to remove any reason for US forces to enter the capital. In such a scenario, the leadership could unilaterally declare a ceasefire, call upon the Iraqi people to lay down their arms, and come out of the city unarmed with its hands in the air. It could use a third party, an envoy, a mediator, or anyone else who could effectively communicate unconditionally their willingness to surrender without further bloodshed.

**RNN:** This would seem to explain why the United States has kept open its communications with the Ministry of Defense. I have seen reports about e-mails and cell phone calls to Iraqi military leaders in hopes that some of these officers would lead a coup or defect...

**JDA:** Yes.

**RNN:** But what about the so-called fedayeen who are believed to be willing to die for the regime? What are they likely to do, and why are they so special?

**JDA:** They are one among other forces dedicated to the regime's defense. Unlike the republican guards, the special security forces, the regular armed forces, and the Ba'th Party's militias, their total number is significantly fewer. [The stated number is 25,000]. The nature and number of their weapons is correspondingly less as well. That is, they do not have tanks, aircraft, or artillery.

What distinguishes them is that they are recruited, trained, and organized in such a way as to manifest as steeled a discipline and devotion as any Iraqi soldiers or civilians dedicated to defending the regime. They are prepared and expected to give the supreme sacrifice if necessary. Their existence pre-dates the present conflict; they are not a new force.

**RNN:** It seems that, until now, they have been a major factor in preventing the fall of Basra. If so, can one avoid dealing with Basra? Does it matter that we take Basra now?

**JDA:** Not really. That is, on the strategic front as far as the American troops are concerned, the war will end when Baghdad capitulates, not when Basra does. That said, even if one were to focus mainly on Baghdad for now, one would have to deal with Basra, Nasiriyyah, and other centers later, as indeed, one would have no choice but to deal with all of Iraq's cities and towns.

**RNN:** Regarding the war's aftermath, how do you see us dealing with the peace? It's been pointed out that when the Israelis invaded Lebanon in June 1982, there was less local opposition than many had anticipated. Yet, after a time, many of the people in southern Lebanon turned on the Israelis and on the United States as well. Could something like that happen in Iraq?

**JDA:** You are right to point out what happened in Lebanon in 1982. The cost of what transpired then and there was tremendous - 17,000 mainly civilian Lebanese and Palestinians killed, 400,000 made homeless, the subsequent attacks on the United States Embassy and the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, and, ultimately, the withdrawal of the Israeli Defense Forces from Lebanon in humiliation and ignominy.

Something similar could indeed happen in Iraq. That is, in many cases, the anger of the Iraqi Arab Shi'a Muslims against Saddam Hussein knows no bounds. But the campaign to get rid of him and his regime, as far as many Shi'a are concerned, is focused on but one issue, one grievance, and one objective.

With Saddam gone, it does not necessarily follow that Iraq's Shi'a will welcome an occupation by U.S. armed forces. Iraq's Shi'a, like Arabs and Muslims elsewhere in the region, are angry at American Middle East policies for reasons that extend beyond the situation in Iraq. They are against what the United States is doing and not doing with regard to such important issues as Jerusalem, the ongoing Israeli occupation, and the Intifada.

As for other American objectives, Iraq's Shi'a citizens, like the country's Kurdish population in the north, have not forgotten what they regard as an American betrayal in March 1991, after the reversal of Iraq's aggression against Kuwait.

**RNN:** Please explain.

**JDA:** When Kuwait was liberated at the end of February 1991, the United States made several decisions that, viewed in the rear view mirror, it would not likely make again.

**RNN:** What were they?

**JDA:** One was not insisting that Saddam Hussein himself come to the ceasefire ceremonies at Safwan, near the Kuwait-Iraq border. Strange as it may seem, this enabled him later to portray as a victory what everyone else saw as his defeat, if only because he and his regime survived the war intact. Two other decisions then also backfired. One was to allow the Iraqi armed forces to retain their helicopters. Another was to agree that the helicopters could be armed. An additional costly decision was [then] President Bush's call for the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands to oust Saddam from power. The last three decisions led to what no one wants to see happen again.

**RNN:** And what was that?

**JDA:** The Shi'a population interpreted President Bush's remarks as encouraging them to rise up and overthrow the regime. They believed that, were they to do so, the United States would support them. They did rise up, but we did not support them; we did not come to their aid. What happened was that the Iraqi military, with far greater firepower in the form of their armed helicopters, waged an asymmetrical war against the insurgents. In very short order, they prevailed. Thousands of Shi'a lives were lost. Our refusal to engage to prevent this from happening ensured the rebels' defeat.

**RNN:** Why did we do that?

**JDA:** For strategic reasons. The American chain of command decided that a sustained Shi'a uprising in southern Iraq was not something we should or could support. Several considerations influenced the decision. One was that the war was over. Many felt it was time to bring the troops home, not to engage them further. These viewed a Shi'a uprising in southern Iraq as a sideshow to liberating Kuwait. Many also believed that, were we to have intervened in the uprising, it would very quickly be revealed that we were out of our depth.

**RNN:** How so?

**JDA:** Among our allies, there was almost no support in favor of our intervening. In addition, were we to have done so, there were signs that the situation could have become very messy very quickly. This would have been the case especially if Iran were to have become involved. Indeed, there were various indications that this might happen. There was also a fear that the Iraqi Shi'a might seek to create a second Islamic republic, backed by Iran. Were that to happen, many believed it would pose potentially grave threats to neighboring Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

**RNN:** What lessons from that apply now?

**JDA:** Several. One starts with the premise that, for many, the outcome of the battle, or series of battles, is less in doubt than the peace that would follow. However uncertain the eventual cost of prevailing on the battlefield for the American and British forces may be, there is an additional, quite different uncertainty. It has to do with what the United States will or will not do once the fighting stops.

As I indicated, Saddam Hussein is but one among other grievances that Iraqis have. With him

gone, what may follow is unlikely to be an extension of nirvana. For example, it remains to be seen what the United States troops may do in bringing about the surrender of Iraqis and the Muslims from many other nationalities that live in Karbala and Najaf.

These are two cities that lie along the routes to Baghdad from the south. [In Karbala is the tomb of Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson; in the latter, is the tomb of Hussein's father, Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, cousin, and the fourth Caliph. The late Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini of Iran lived in Najaf in exile for most of the period from 1964 to 1978]. After Makkah, Madinah, and Jerusalem, these two sites in Iraq are among the most revered of shrines to Shi'a worldwide.

Secondly, it is one thing for the United States to be able to deal with the physical and technical aspects of repairing and rebuilding much of Iraq's infrastructure. That is, no one doubts the degree of expertise that American engineers and other specialists can bring to bear in repairing damaged roads, schools, health clinics, hospitals, bridges, dams, and clogged waterways.

What is lacking, however, is sufficient American expertise of another kind: namely, judgment and wisdom in matters pertaining to the Iraqi people. It speaks volumes that in our country of 280 million, barely a handful of Americans can hold their own in a conversation about the anthropological makeup -- the internal cultural, social and political workings -- of Iraq for, say, as long as forty-five minutes, based on extensive firsthand familiarity with the country and its people.

**RNN:** Why is this?

The small contingent of former American diplomats, military officers, and intelligence personnel who once served in Iraq was never large to begin with. Their numbers continue to dwindle. The majority are retired. [We had practically no one in Baghdad or elsewhere in the country during the period from 1967-1984, as relations were broken when Israel invaded Egypt in June 1967. From 1984, after relations were restored, until 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and relations were severed again, at no point did we have as many as twenty].

The concern has to do with the nature and extent of firsthand American empirical expertise and education relating to Iraq. It hardly exists. Regarding Iran, Iraq's eastern neighbor, as many as a thousand Americans can rightly be termed Iran specialists. The same can be said with regard to Turkey. Large numbers of American Peace Corps volunteers lived and worked in these two countries for two years or more. No American has ever served with the Peace Corps in Iraq.

In addition, the number of American military officials who have served tours of any length in Iran and Turkey dwarfs the number of their counterparts who have served in Iraq. The same is true of business and corporate representatives. Thousands of private sector Americans have lived and worked in neighboring Iran and Turkey, as well as in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Fewer than twenty have acquired such expertise inside Iraq.

The dearth of any significant depth and breadth of firsthand experience among American Iraq specialists is dramatically demonstrated among the numerous talking heads and pundits on

American television talk shows. It is also apparent in the published media among those who hold forth with their Iraq-centric analyses, perceptions, understanding, and policy recommendations. In both categories, most of the speakers and authors have never set foot in Iraq.

The concern is not about an American ability to fix and administer inanimate things. This we have. The concern is with how to deal effectively with Iraqis as human beings. As a country and a people, we do not have anywhere near the requisite Iraq-related cultural, linguistic, and country study skills to do the job. More importantly, neither, in the eyes of significant numbers of Iraqis, do we have among our own citizens even the most elemental personal attributes of trust and confidence to inspire the view that we are likely to handle well the peace that will eventually come to Iraq and the Iraqi people.

The crux of the matter lies in our being able to deal day in and day out with such fundamental questions as whom among the Iraqi people gets what, why, and how? It is also in being able to deal effectively with the flip side of the same question: who does not get this, that, or the other reward or benefit, which, by rights, by tradition, by time-honored practice, or by some other valid criteria, they and their kinfolk believe they deserve?

More specifically, there is a major deficit in the number of Americans who are deeply versed in Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities. In addition, few Americans are able analytically or otherwise to address the nature, orientation, and perpetuation of Iraq's tribes, or the interplay among Iraqis of longstanding loyalties, institutions, beliefs, and practices.

Moreover, no more than a handful of Americans can interpret for the novice outsider the implications of the push and pull of regional, sub-regional, and local dynamics among the array of social, economic, and political forces that comprise the inner core of Iraqi society as they do in many other societies. Fewer still are the Americans who can hold their own in briefing their superiors or colleagues on the vast and complex body of extended clan, marriage, and related phenomena that, for anyone who would seek to "administer" Iraq, can spell the difference between being effective on the people-to-people front, or failing to navigate successfully the shoals of Iraqi domestic dynamics.

Not only do we not have what is required on these fronts. One is already seeing the consequences of our being less prepared than we need to be for what lies ahead. For example, many of the defectors, opposition group members, and other Iraqis upon whom the United States is and will continue to be dependent for administering postwar Iraq are only human in having accumulated years of grudges and grievances against their fellow citizens.

For many, some of the ideas of what is best for their country in the future are heavily colored by notions of hatred and revenge. Group A's leaders wish to remove or counter past slights to honor associated with Group B. Group C's leaders hope to extinguish various remnants of shame rooted in something once done to them by Group D. Faction X is keen to bring their faction to power. Faction Y is bent on retaining its position, power, and privileges. Faction Z is determined to put one or more minorities in their place and keep them there. And so on.

Among any bruised and battered people, the existence of such sentiments is understandable.

How they will work out or be moderated amidst the imperative of obtaining sustainable peace and stability as soon as possible, let alone in meeting the challenge of fulfilling Iraqi national and allied coalition interests in building a secure and prosperous country, remains to be seen.

---

**Dr. John Duke Anthony** is President and CEO, National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations; Publisher of GulfWire; and Secretary of the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee. All three are Washington, D.C.-based non-profit and nongovernmental organizations dedicated to educating Americans and others about the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.

**GulfWire is a public service of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations and the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee**  
Independent commentary provided in 'GulfWire' and materials contained in the linked Internet sites do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations or the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee. GulfWire and the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations/U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee have not independently verified the accounts referred to and do not vouch for their accuracy or the reliability of Internet links.