Before being overthrown by the Americans and their allies in 2003, Saddam Hussein, who ruled Iraq singlehandedly for 24 years, led the Iraqi branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, which played a crucial role in the life of every Iraqi. What was the renown of Saddam Hussein like among the people, and why did the country practically not resist foreign invaders? What do Iraqis think of their former president today? How has the Ba'ath Party been able to function underground since its ban in 2003?

When Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979, he, first of all, built a cult of personality. He had his portraits hung in every office of state institutions and had his image applied to banknotes. The school curriculum included a mandatory study of the biography of the president. Magazine pieces and academic papers began and ended with praises of Saddam Hussein. Books were written about him, songs of praise were sung about him, and films were made. Since 1989, monuments to the leader of the nation had been actively erected throughout Iraq. Universities and streets were named after him. Occupied in 1990, Kuwait was named as the province of Iraq Saddamiyat al-Mitla' district.

Despite the intense efforts of state propaganda to create an image of a caring father of the nation, the people did not like Saddam Hussein. In 1991, after the defeat in the Gulf War, waves of Shiite uprisings swept across Iraq, only to be brutally suppressed. In Iraq, most of the population is Shia (about 60%), but since the Ottoman Empire, the military and political elite have been mainly Sunnis living in the north (about 30%). Saddam Hussein and his entourage were Sunni. According to the data of Human Rights Watch, about 290,000 people went missing for the entire period of Saddam Hussein’s stay in power in Iraq. Saddam did not share supreme power with anyone other than his relatives, who came from Tikrit. He entered the Guinness Book of World Records as the head of state with
the largest number of relatives in government positions.

To be a full member of society, a citizen had to join the Ba’ath party. Persons who were not members of this party were not allowed to enter universities or work in the civil service.

Saddam Hussein's army consisted of about 375,000 soldiers. It was well-armed and equipped. However, when the USA and its allies launched an operation to overthrow the Iraqi President in 2003, most of the Iraqi army either offered no resistance to the coalition forces or surrendered. Such a quick defeat is because almost no one wanted to die for the dictator. Once the terror of the entire Middle East, the army was defeated in just three weeks.

The US invasion of Iraq played a controversial role. On the one hand, the region was liberated from Saddam Hussein, unable to negotiate, who could technically try to start a new war against his neighbors. On the other hand, a new hotbed of instability appeared in the Middle East. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in 2015 that he partly shared the view that the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies, including the United Kingdom, was one of the main reasons for the emergence of DAESH (a terrorist organization banned in Russia).

Sometime after the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime, the people of Iraq changed their attitude towards their former president. Many respondents said that life under Saddam Hussein was much better than after his overthrow in various opinion polls. This opinion was expressed even by those who were prosecuted on political charges during the rule of Saddam Hussein. For the Iraqis, a patched-up peace seemed better than a good war.

The Ba’ath Party, banned in Iraq in 2003, virtually collapsed in the same year. Most of the party officials were either executed or arrested. The core of the party was Sunni Muslims. The few surviving party leaders fled to northern Iraq, where Sunnis are the majority of the population. Others fled to Syria, where the Syrian branch of the Ba’ath Party, led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, remains in power.

In 2006, after the execution of Saddam Hussein, who was listed as the regional secretary of the Iraqi branch of the Ba’ath Party until the end of his days, the branch split up. Mohammed Younis al-Ahmed, one of Saddam's former confidants, who fled to Syria, declared himself the leader of the Iraqi Ba’ath on January 3, 2007. However, now he has few supporters, and he is not active in politics.

Around the same time, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, the country’s former Vice President, Saddam Hussein’s right-hand man who remained in Iraq, was elected head of the Party. The people of al-Douri actively participated in the resistance to the American occupation, committing all sorts of sabotage against the US army. With each passing year, they became more and more Islamized. At some point, the remaining supporters of Saddam Hussein's regime and radical Islamists acted together, declaring jihad on America. In 2014, supporters of al-Douri and DAESH (banned in Russia) jointly took part in the assault on Mosul. By the end of 2017, the territories occupied by DAESH returned to the control of the Iraqi government. The remaining Islamists and few surviving members of the banned Ba’ath Party went underground. Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri died in 2020 after a long illness. After his death, the influence of the Ba’ath Party waned.

In conclusion, the US military invasion has harmed public sentiment in Iraq. The situation in the country remains unstable. The positive memories of the population about the period of Saddam Hussein's rule are due not to the fact that he was a good president but to the fact that there was no war under him. If people had wanted to keep things the way they were, many more volunteers would have joined the rebels' ranks, led by former leaders of the Ba'ath Party.

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