

WAR IN THE GULF: P.O.W.'s; Iraqi Use of Captured Airmen: Old Tactics

By ELAINE SCIOLINO, Special to The New York Times
Published: January 25, 1991

Iraq's parading of captured pilots in front of television cameras, their faces bruised and their statements apparently made under coercion, and its threat to use them as human shields is reminiscent of the Iraqi treatment of Iranian prisoners during the Iran-Iraq war.

EMAIL
PRINT

During the long border war, Iranian soldiers, including teen-agers, were routinely interviewed on Iraqi television, presented to foreign journalists and prodded into proclaiming the wisdom of Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein, and the inhumanity of the Iranian Government. The Iraqis also paraded the soldiers through the streets of Baghdad and retrained them as soldiers to fight Iran.

In a film often shown to visitors during that conflict, Mr. Hussein appeared with 20 Iranian child-prisoners, lecturing them on the war effort as one of his daughters gave each of them a carnation.

"When the war ends," he told them, "come back and enjoy our country's hospitality."
Mistreatment of P.O.W's

"P.O.W.'s were used in precisely the same way during the war," Shaul Bakhash, an Iranian historian and expert on the Iran-Iraq war, said of this week's prisoner displays. "What we are seeing is vintage Saddam."

The United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross documented widespread mistreatment of Iranian P.O.W.'s in violation of the Geneva Conventions, including beatings, torture, deprivation of food and water, inadequate medical care and their use as propaganda tools. Although the Baghdad Government's treatment of the Iranians improved over time, human-rights analysts are concerned that Iraq's abuse of P.O.W.'s in the past will be repeated in the current war.

"The Iraqis' handling of Iranian P.O.W.'s suggests that they will be entirely ruthless with the captured pilots and do whatever they think will promote their own interest, without any regard for the Geneva Conventions," said David Korn, a retired Foreign Service officer and author of the Middle East Watch study, "Human Rights in Iraq."

The Iraqis' treatment of Iranian prisoners throughout the war received little attention in the West. American officials acknowledged that the abuses were largely ignored for two reasons: Iran was also brutalizing Iraqi prisoners of war and Iraq's geopolitical and commercial importance vastly outweighed concern about human-rights abuses. Geneva Convention Violations

But now, the television footage of the allied pilots has drawn international condemnation of Iraq for violating the Geneva Conventions and calls for Mr. Hussein and his aides to be tried for war crimes.

The allied pilots are not the only P.O.W.'s held in Iraq. Iran and Iraq still hold the other's soldiers, despite the fact that the Iran-Iraq war ended in a cease-fire in the summer of 1988.

The fact that Iraq still holds Iranian P.O.W.'s suggests that Baghdad may try to use allied pilots as bargaining chips in an eventual settlement of the war.

Photo: Iraq's treatment of captured allied pilots, experts say, is reminiscent of its abuse of prisoners in the war with Iran. Lieut. Jeffrey N. Zaun of the Navy, left, was shown being questioned on Iraqi television. (Iraqi television via CNN)

