

PROPAGANDA IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

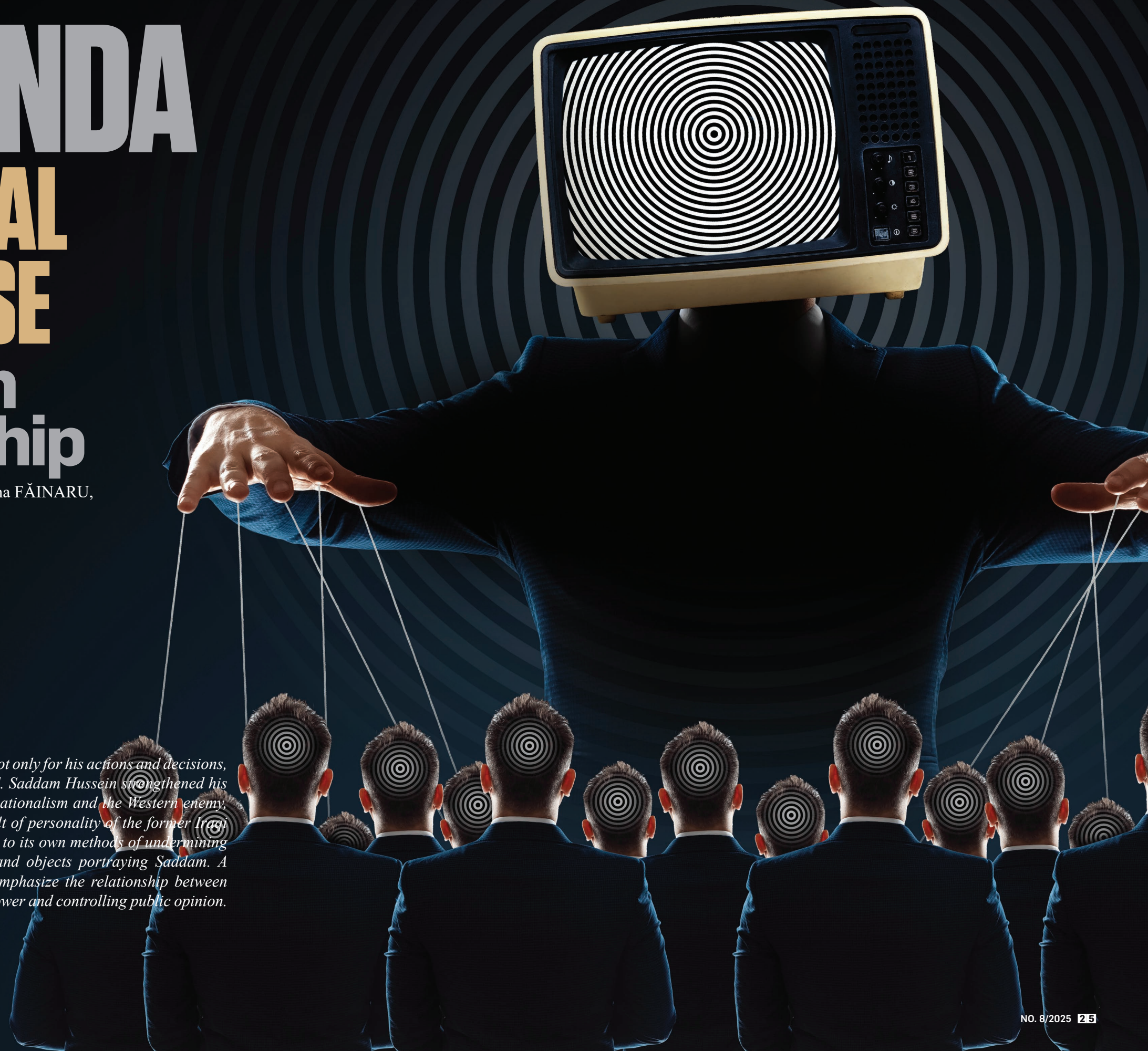
A weapon of dictatorship

Author: Superior intelligence instructor Andreea-Elena FĂINARU,
PhD candidate - ANIMV

ABSTRACT

As the leader of Iraq from 1979 to 2003, Saddam Hussein stood out not only for his actions and decisions, but also for his speeches addressed to the Iraqi public and the wider world. Saddam Hussein strengthened his leadership with intense propaganda, built on the concepts of Arab unity, nationalism and the Western enemy, taking on the role of the savior of the Arab World. This gave rise to the cult of personality of the former Iraqi leader. In its attempts to combat pro-regime propaganda, the West resorted to its own methods of undermining Saddam Hussein's authority: distributing images, slogans, caricatures, and objects portraying Saddam. A critical analysis of Saddam Hussein's propagandistic speeches aims to emphasize the relationship between language, power and ideology, established for the purpose of legitimizing power and controlling public opinion.

Keywords: propaganda, power, politics, discourse, Iraq.



Introduction

Throughout history, propaganda has served as a tool of the ruling social class to control citizens and make them conform to the imposed ideology. Due to its subtle or even hidden nature, propaganda works through tools such as persuasion and manipulation. In modern systems, it is the propaganda of integration through which ideological standardization is implemented in society. Governments also use propaganda to encourage citizens to act and think according to the general philosophy and create and maintain an artificial image of society (Fitzmaurice, 2018).

Although propaganda is associated with the West, where it has its starting point, this concept is not unknown to Arab societies, where certain ideologies and beliefs must be spread or justified.

In Iraqi society, propaganda is recognized as a weapon of the ruling regime, a practice that can be seen as a legacy reinforced by former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. During his more than twenty-year presidency, propaganda became Saddam's main ally in his war against powerful international enemies, a tool that kept his ideals alive.

Evolution of the term *propaganda*

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the term propaganda first appeared around 1621-1623, in the *Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith*¹. At the time, propaganda indicated an organization or movement for propagating a particular religious doctrine or practice. With the secularization of the state, the term *propaganda* took on political connotations, moving away from the religious sphere (Fitzmaurice, 2018). Later, the OED online defined propaganda as "the systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, to promote a particular cause or point of view, often a political agenda. Also, information is disseminated in this way, as well as the means or media by which such ideas are disseminated" (OED online).

In his work, *Propaganda. The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, the French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul (1973) describes propaganda as a sociological phenomenon, which exists and thrives in a technological society, rather than a mechanism applied by some people

for some purposes. Moreover, Ellul contradicts the view that propaganda is based on lies and proposes another view: propaganda operates with different shades of truth, half-truths, limited or even absolute truths taken out of context (Kellen, 1965).

Ellul argues that a second misconception that makes people vulnerable to propaganda is the belief that it serves only to shape opinions. This is only one of its secondary purposes. Much more importantly, propaganda aims to intensify existing tendencies, emphasize and focus them, and encourage people to act; when directed against adversaries, propaganda aims to discourage them from carrying out their plans. Ellul's sharpest distinction is between "agitation propaganda" and "integration propaganda", two phenomena worldwide. The former channels people's resentment into rebellion, while the latter aims to mold people into desired patterns. The two types rely on entirely different means (Kellen, 1965).

On education and its role, Ellul contradicts the widespread notion that education is the best weapon against propaganda. On the contrary, Ellul argues that education, as understood in the modern world, is a precursor to propaganda, calling it "pre-propaganda" - the conditioning of minds through large amounts of incoherent information, distributed for a specific purpose. Ellul believes that intellectuals are the most vulnerable group to modern propaganda because they absorb the most significant amount of unverifiable information, feel the need to have an opinion on every important contemporary issue, and thus readily succumb to the opinions offered by propaganda and rely solely on their judgment (Kellen, 1965).

Ellul's ideas are never based on statistics or quantification, which he deeply despises, but on observation and logic (Kellen, 1965). In concluding his work, Ellul warns of the major danger posed by propaganda, a danger more significant than any other threat promoted.

Edward Bernays (1928) proposed the term *public relations* as an alternative to *propaganda*. He argues that promoting what we believe is education, while promoting what we do not believe is propaganda (Zienkowski, 2021). Bernays' democratic relativism is still a topic of discussion today in the many debates between critics and supporters of conspiracy theories, alternative facts, and science in an environment marked by fake news and polarizing processes, digitally amplified. Sources argue that the term has acquired negative connotations over time, once it came to be associated with totalitarian regimes, war efforts, publicity, and private interests (Zienkowski, 2021).

Bernays highlights the idea that people's voices express their beliefs, which are shaped by leaders and those key persons who understand the manipulation of public opinion. Their beliefs result from inherited prejudices, symbols, and clichés that leaders provide (Bernays, 1928). The one who understands people's way of thinking, knows what they accept, what they want, and what they reject is the politician. In general, however, politicians do not possess ultimate knowledge, and only occasionally may a leader emerge who embodies all the traits of a leader (Bernays, 1928).

In his work *The Tyranny of Communication*, Ignacio Ramonet (2000) refers to the power of the media. The press is also called the fourth state power, alongside the legislative, executive, and judiciary, and has a critical function. However, in a society where the traditional hierarchy of powers is no longer respected, the press becomes an instrument of influence, decision-making, and action (Ramonet, 2000).

Political communication

The link between language and political communication is strong, based on words through which political reality is constructed. Language is a means of expressing thoughts or ideas and a tool for manipulating perceptions and social behavior. For example, the choice of specific words can influence the public's understanding of an event, create a positive or negative image of a leader, or encourage the masses to support a political goal.

Thus, political communication is based on a deep understanding of language, not only in its semantic sense, but also in its rhetorical and persuasive functions. Language remains the foundation through which politicians influence their audiences and present their policy.

Political discourse involves convincing an audience, and the politician mobilizes various communication skills to convey his message and influence his listeners (Mazraani, 1997). Rodica Zafiu calls political discourse "the essence of political activity", describing it as influencing reality to a greater extent than any other type of discourse (Zafiu, 2007).

An analysis of political speeches needs to consider the political context at the time of its delivery and the contextual factors: the audience, the subject of the speech, the time, the place, and the type of speech - a continuous speech, a debate, an interview, a planned speech read aloud, a spontaneous speech, etc. The analysis could also take into consideration the defining characteristics of the speaker (e.g., place of birth, education, religion)

and all other elements that would influence the speaker's speech. It could also analyze the attitudes of a community towards a variety of languages and the *values* attached to a particular dialect, to understand the changes between language levels according to communicative purposes (Mazraani, 1997).

Political language has no features of its own. However, it is easily recognizable in the public space. It is generally identified with the standard language of journalistic, legal, and administrative influence, and its most important features are persuasive stakes and ideological content (Zafiu, 2007).

By studying language in circumstances in which all its functions and variations are taken into account, it is highlighted how perceptions, beliefs, and identities are influenced by language. During election campaigns, the ideas and ideologies behind political discourses must be conveyed through language so that they are accepted by the direct receivers and by the receivers who come into contact with the discourse through various media. Words and phrases are intentionally used or omitted to influence meaning in different ways.

Arab political discourse analysis is at the crossroads of different disciplines, such as dialectology, political science, anthropological linguistics, discourse analysis, and rhetoric (Mazraani, 2006).

Such an analysis needs to consider the political context at the time of its delivery and contextual factors such as the audience, the subject of the speech, the venue, and the type of speech (uninterrupted speech, debate, interview, planned speech, speech read aloud, etc.). The analysis could also be based on data related to the speaker's biography (place of birth, education, religion)—all elements that would influence the speaker's speech—in order to understand the alternation of language levels for communicative purposes (Mazraani, 2006).

In his article *Arabic Political Discourse*, Emad Abdul Latif (2018) presents the tradition of Arabic political discourse, focusing on its characteristics and trends in Arab culture.

Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) is a discipline mainly concerned with studying social and political communication, whether manifested through texts, speeches, images, references, symbols, or other signs. PDA aims to understand how political discourses work and how they perform their functions, which are often associated with obtaining, legitimizing, and maintaining power. PDA includes the analysis of discourse production, its linguistic and semiotic structures, performance, distribution, reception, influence, and response. The defining element of political discourse emphasizes structures, aesthetics, and performance rather than political theses and ideas (Abdul Latif, 2018).

¹ A committee of Cardinals responsible for foreign missions, founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV (OED).

Abdul Latif (2018) notes that political discourse appeared in the Arab space even before the advent of Islam, in a different form, adapted to the historical context. Prescriptive and descriptive approaches to political discourse were more common than critical approaches. One can hardly find Arab works dealing with the critique of political discourse in the sense of its being an instrument of domination and hegemony or in terms of uncovering manipulative techniques. This could be an effect of the lack of social and academic freedom. The ruling class held power, and the masses had no choice but to obey. The forced reclaiming of power, or the transfer of power, was done without the participation of the ordinary people (Abdul Latif, 2018).

As in any society, dissatisfaction with the ruler's speech is inevitable. However, it can only be expressed publicly and freely in a democratic context, where there should be no fear of consequences. In all types of political systems, from autocratic to oligarchic to democratic, the leader has relied on oral discourse to convince others of the benefits of being in charge. The more democratic societies become, the more difficult the task of the leader is to convince potential supporters that they can trust him and his policies (Charteris-Black, 2011).

Critical analysis of Arab political discourse has developed over the last two decades with the gradual collapse of most totalitarian regimes in the Arab world. This is reflected in the growing number of studies addressing the relationship between discourse and power. Studies usually focus on how political discourse analysis reflects social injustice and hegemony to uncover tactics of manipulation and dissimulation (Abdul Latif, 2018).

The dictator-discourse link

Historically, it has been shown that a common trait of political leaders labeled as dictators is oratory, or the art of speaking beautifully and persuasively. Speech has been used as a primary tool to attract and manipulate the masses and justify actions and decisions in front of an audience. After all, dictators, once in power, still need their people so they can maintain their authority – not to be understood as their position – and to feed their ego and narcissistic personality.

Dictatorship as a system of government, according to the Iranian psychologist Fathali M. Moghaddam, is characterized by the inability of the people to elect, criticize, and replace their leader through democratic means. Moghaddam notes that in order to rise to the position of state leader, a set of factors has to combine so

that a potential dictator obtains the power (Moghaddam, 2013).

Such a political conjuncture made it possible for Saddam Hussein to become president of Iraq in 1979.

Saddam Hussein's propaganda

The personality of Saddam Hussein remains prominent in modern history, as the country was involved in a series of conflicts during his tenure (1979-2003) that escalated internationally. In 1980, Saddam ordered Iraqi troops to invade the Khuzestan region of Iran, while in 1990, he sent troops into neighboring Kuwait under the pretext of reclaiming territory that rightfully belonged to Iraq. The initiative gave rise to the Iraq-Kuwait war, also known as the Gulf War. This regional conflict quickly becomes an international one after the UN Security Council imposes sanctions on Iraq and demands the urgent withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait. Saddam Hussein refuses to cooperate with Western powers led by the United States (Britannica, n.d.). So, the international coalition formed against Saddam Hussein sends its troops into Iraq, putting the country on a downward trajectory.

Since replacing his mentor, General Hassan al-Bakr, Saddam has not only managed to stay in power, but has consolidated his position despite a devastating war and other setbacks. Saddam Hussein was able to prevent regime change and consolidate his control over the Iraqi system of government, while at the same time initiating projects that would have toppled a weaker ruler. The long war waged against Iran became a test of Saddam's strength and a testament to the extent to which Saddam was able to stifle dissent, consolidate his power, and identify with the state (Des Roches, 1990).

Throughout his term in office, the Iraqi leader pursued two central policies: the opposition of Iraq to the Zionist current and the reinforcement of Iraq's status as a leader of the Arabs against the Iranian threat. In terms of the Arab states' common opposition to Israel, Iraq's contributions, implicitly those of Saddam, were predominantly rhetorical and less military (Des Roches 1990). Iraq was also active in promoting and financing the Palestinian cause, both on a declarative level, through speeches made by the leader of the state, and in financing the uprising movement, publicizing during the first intifada its donation of three million dollars (Des Roches, 1990).

To justify his war against Iran, Saddam's rhetoric takes on a religious tone, claiming that no non-native

Arabic speaker can ever understand Islam. The former Iranian Ayatollah, Ruhollah Khomeini, is portrayed as an apostate who capitalizes on the gullibility of ordinary people in order to spur them into a war (Des Roches, 1990).

To ensure that he was in control of setting the new national agenda, Saddam began a process of self-promotion, which turned into a cult of personality. Propaganda tools included: spreading giant portraits, promoting his descent in the line of the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, and frequent appearances in military uniform. Through his efforts, Saddam sought to control the ordinary population and the ruling elite (Des Roches, 1990).

Manipulation techniques in Saddam Hussein's speech

EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

In order to shape a desired ideal image, Saddam Hussein often appeals to the target audience's feelings. One such example is given below. On the occasion of Army Day (1980), Saddam delivered a speech in which he addressed the Iraqi people, encouraging them to be proud of the Iraqi army, an army with an unblemished history. The leader invoked feelings of pride, positioning himself as a brother of the people.

1. *Wa-'anna-kum min bayna-l-qalīl min aš-šu'ūb wa-l-'umam allatī taḥtafilu bi-hāḍihi-l-munāsaba dūna 'an tucānī min ḍikrā ayy yawm min 'al-'ayyām ḡayši-kum yartabiṭu bi-ḥālat hazīma aw bi-mawqif ḍa'if yaḡ'alu-kum taqūlūn 'īda-hu lam yakun. Yatakammalu 'īd al-ḡayš ma'āni-hi fa-yakūn māḍī-hi wa-hāḍiru-hu ghurra bayḍā' ghayr mudannasa. Na'am, ayyuhā al-'ihwa inna tāriq ḡayši-kum nāši' al-bayḍā'.* (YouTube, 2016)

English translation:

You are among the few people and nations who celebrate this occasion without suffering the memory of any day in the history of their army to be associated with a defeat or a weak position, which would cause you to say that this day should not exist. Army Day fully fulfills its significance, with its past and present being a clean, white spot. Yes, brothers, your army history is spotless white.

Saddam Hussein often resorts to repetition to intensify the sentiment and emphasize his message. For example, in the following fragment, Saddam addresses the world, asking other nations, repeatedly, to stop and let Iraq defeat Zionism.

2. *Kāfi! Kāfi qubūl bi-l-mahāna! Kāfi al-ḍu'f! Kāfi al-ḍu'f! Yanbaḡī 'an yuḍa' ḥadd li-l-ṣaḥtūniyya! Wa-'idā 'umr mā ḡādirīn tarā 'al-'Irāq wāḥid yaḡdir yiḥuṭṭilūm ḥadd.* (YouTube, 2020)

English translation:

Enough! Enough humiliation! No more weakness! Zionism must be stopped! And if you cannot, know that Iraq can put an end to it!

Another example is presented below, highlighting Saddam's idea that a true leader is ready to fight for his people and his country.

3. *'Ayb 'alā kull wāḥid yaqūl ānī sayyid, sayyid sha'bī, ya'nī ra'īs ad-dawla, ya'nī sayyid aš-ša'b. Malik aš-ša'b ya'nī sayyid aš-ša'b. 'Ayb 'alā wāḥid yaqūl ānī sayyid ša'bī wa mā yaqdir yaḥmil sayf 'alā ḍarb!* (YouTube, 2020)

English translation:

Shame on him who says 'I am the master of my people', that is the president of the country, that is the master of the people! King of the people, that is the master of the people! Shame on him who says 'I am the master of my people' and cannot hold the sword to strike!

SYMBOLS AND SLOGANS

In his struggle against Israel, Jerusalem becomes a symbol of Arab unity in Saddam Hussein's speeches, being a mirror of the Arabs' good intentions, and a place they can all call home.

4. *Inna-nā narā 'al-Quds min 'ayy makān mahmā ba'uda 'an mawqī 'i-hā, li-'nna-l-Quds ba'da 'an tunīra finā kull mā huwwa hayr fī š-ṣuḍūr (...).* (YouTube, 2020)

English translation:

"We see Jerusalem from every place, no matter how far away from its position it may be, because Jerusalem, after all, is shining all that is best in our souls (...)."

One of the slogans about Saddam Hussein indicates his full authority: Saddam becomes one with Iraq. By saying this, it means that he is willing to fight for his country, because he puts his life in the hands of Iraq.

5. *Idā qāla Ṣaddām, qāla-l-'Irāq.* (Hisham Haidar Al Nasiriyah, 2009)

English translation:

If [someone] says Saddam, [they] say Iraq.

THE COMMON ENEMY (US VERSUS THEM)

In his speeches, Saddam points to Iran, Israel, and the United States as his enemies, against whom he and the Iraqi people are forced to fight. Thus, he unites people against these countries. As he identifies with Iraq, the wars that he is willing to engage in automatically become Iraq's wars too.

6. *Ma huwwa aṭ-ṭarīq? Al-qīṭāl, al-qīṭāl ḥattā an-naṣr bifidā' 'an al-waṭan wa 'an aš-šaraf ḥattā an-naṣr. Bi'umq š-nsewih? (...) Ta'jīzu-h huwwa al-laḏī yuqarrib as-salām. 'Indamā ya'jiz yaqbal, yaqbal bi-ṭarīqat as-salām. Wa al-Khomeinī 'indamā yudrik anna-hu yahsar aktar mim mā yarbaḥ yuqīm as-salām ḥattā huwwa ḥayy wa bi-qarār min-hu. Li-anna al-Khomeinī istahdam as-siyāsa fī kull mīdān, wa iyyāh al-Isrā'īliyyīn istahdamu-h wa ištaḡḡalu as-silāḥ bi-qarār min-hu. Wa iyyāh al-Amrīkān illī fāḥidah min al-milyārāt la'ib al-qaḏāyā ar-ruhān, tumma aṭlaqa-hum bi-qarār min-hu. Fa-huwwa as-siyāsī. Ma huwwa aṭ-ṭarīq? Al-qīṭāl.* (YouTube, 2018)

English translation:

What is the way? Struggle, struggle until victory, sacrificing for our country and honor, until victory. In depth, what to do? (...) Weakening him is what brings peace. When he is weakened, he will accept the way of peace. And Khomeini, when he realizes that he is losing more than he is gaining, will establish peace, by his own decision. Because Khomeini has used politics in all fields, and so have the Israelis used it and worked it with guns at his decision. And the Americans, who spent billions playing with the hostage issue, then released them at his decision. So, he is a politician. What is the way? Fight.

The impact of propaganda on the population and the West's response

As with other leaders considered dictators, public opinion either blames Saddam Hussein's legacy or praises his achievements and regrets the time when Iraq played a major role on the international political stage.

The testimonies of those who say they welcome the end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship are based on grievances about the curtailment of citizens' rights and freedoms. Iraqi human rights activist Faisal al-Mutar says:

7. *Just like many Iraqis at the time who grew up under Saddam Hussein, we didn't have access to that*

much information coming to us from the outside world, including other Arab countries. Some of my family friends had satellite television, which was punishable as a crime [...].

We only had a few major television stations, controlled by the Iraqi government. First was Iraq TV, which was the primary one. That station played lots of "patriotic music" of the Ba'ath party along with some "news" of Saddam's constant meetings and how great he was. The second one was [...] "Youth TV" controlled by his son Uday, which had some western movies and music and "mature content" that was edited for religious and cultural purposes. [...]. (Faisal al-Mutar, 2018, Aspen Institute)

Portraits of Saddam Hussein were familiar sights on the streets of Iraq, present everywhere: in squares, schools, or bus stops. After the regime fell, some Iraqis who detested him wanted the images removed (Imperial War Museums).

On the other hand, content available online, on the YouTube platform, with Saddam Hussein as its subject, is commented on by various users who issue opinions praising the Iraqi former leader's legacy, such as:

8. "I am non Muslim huge respect to this man who fought for his nation and people" (YouTube, 2022).

9. "I'm from Vietnam. We Vietnamese people are taught to respect and be grateful to this man" (YouTube, 2022).

10. "One of the saddest part of life is no one knows your value until you are gone" (YouTube, 2022).

11. "The only thing I could remember about this guy is, he was accused of having a weapon of mass destruction, but when the war was over, there is no weapon of mass destruction found!!!! So sad!!!!" (YouTube, 2022).

12. "I'm starting to believe that whoever this government and media says is the bad guy is actually the good guy" (YouTube, 2022).

To combat Saddam Hussein's propaganda, Western countries have resorted to various methods, including printing posters depicting the Iraqi leader with slogans such as "Wanted. The Mother of All Evil" and "The cold face of death and war." Another was the manufacture of animal toys, which depicted him holding a gasoline hose to parody his control of Iraq's oil assets. Packs of playing cards were also made depicting Saddam as an ace, along with other members of his elite (Imperial War Museums, n.d.).

Later, Saddam Hussein memorabilia became a very lucrative business. In April 2003, it appeared on online auction sites—pieces of broken statues, Iraqi

coins depicting his face, and even cutlery looted from his palaces were bought for considerable sums (Imperial War Museums, n.d.).

Iraqi artist Jamal Penjweny shows the impact of Saddam Hussein's personality in Iraq through his "Saddam is Here" series of photographs. The subjects of his photographs have a portrait of Saddam in front of their faces to conceal their identity and feelings about the former dictator. Penjweny says: "Iraqi society cannot forget him even after his death because some of us still love him and the rest are still afraid of him" (Imperial War Museums, n.d.).

Conclusion

Propaganda, a tool of influence at any leader's fingertips, can become a real weapon under a dictatorial regime. Saddam Hussein was one of those leaders who used propaganda to keep himself in power for an extended period and to carry out his plans, enjoying the support of the people he ruled. It later turned out that this support was fueled by a more or less sincere patriotism, a general state of misinformation, and, last but not least, a deep-rooted fear among the masses.

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