

In reporting on the regime's lavish mosque-building program since the mid-1990s, while consumer goods and many necessities were in short supply or unavailable in Iraq, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted a European diplomat in Baghdad, who spoke on condition of anonymity:

“The people's well-being is not on the priority list of the regime. The regime is solely concerned with its own survival. A huge mosque-building scheme may help the formerly secular – almost atheist – and socialist regime to get more fully reincorporated into the family of the Arab nations, whereas the plight of a majority of the ordinary people can be used as its propaganda shield.”²³

The Hajj Shakedowns

Nowhere is the dichotomy between Saddam's religious rhetoric and practice more obvious than with the way he has treated faithful Iraqis seeking to make the Hajj. The Iraqi regime interferes with religious pilgrimages, both of Iraqi Muslims who wish to make the Hajj to Mecca and Medina and of Iraqi and non-Iraqi Muslim pilgrims who travel to holy sites within the country. Baghdad has refused all proposals for travel that did not involve direct payments to the government.

In 1998 the UN Sanctions Committee offered to disburse vouchers for travel and expenses to pilgrims making the Hajj, but the Government rejected this offer. Then again in 1999 the Sanctions Committee offered to disburse funds to cover Hajj-related expenses via a neutral third party; the Government again rejected the offer. Following the December 1999 passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1284, the Sanctions Committee proposed to issue \$250 in cash and \$1,750 in traveler's checks to each individual pilgrim to be distributed at the UN office in Baghdad in the presence of both UN and Iraqi officials. The Government again declined and, consequently, no Iraqi pilgrims were able to take advantage of the available funds or of the permitted flights. The Government also has attempted to use pilgrimages to circumvent sanctions for its own financial benefit. In 2001 the Government continued to insist that UN-offered funds for Hajj pilgrims be deposited in the government-controlled central bank and placed under the control of government officials for disbursement rather than given to the pilgrims.²⁴

The regime has imposed a variety of schemes to extract money from religious pilgrims by requiring them to pay fees directly to the Iraqi Central Bank. Estimates vary considerably, but it is clear that Saddam Hussein brings in millions of dollars annually in this way. According to the Coalition for International Justice:

“After refusing yet another UN plan to fund travel for the Hajj in 1999, Baghdad bused some 18,000 Iraqi pilgrims to the Saudi border, where they were encouraged to demonstrate and demand that the Saudis release frozen Iraqi funds to pay for their trip. Instead, King Fahd welcomed the Iraqi pilgrims and promised that Saudi Arabia would provide all arrangements free of charge. With no prospect of Saudi payments to the government from frozen funds or other sources, Saddam ordered the pilgrims back to Baghdad.”