



A SYMPHONY FOR A COMMON MAN (SINFONIA DE UM HOMEM COMUM)



STUDY GUIDE

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A Symphony for a Common Man

The Iraq War, justified by the United States on the false premise that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, led to the deaths of over six hundred thousand people and devastated the country. Brazilian diplomat José Bustani, the first Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), played a pivotal role in attempting to bring Iraq into compliance with chemical weapons regulations. Under his impartial leadership, countries traditionally distrusted by multilateral organizations were brought into the fold. As he neared success, the U.S. government, intent on regime change and securing oil interests, exerted relentless pressure on Bustani to abandon his efforts. When he refused to yield, the U.S. orchestrated his removal from office through misleading accusations of mismanagement. Nearly twenty years later, Bustani, now retired in Rio de Janeiro, reflects on this American abuse of power and the missed opportunity to prevent a catastrophic war.

Iraq

Iraq is located in southwestern Asia. It is bordered by Turkey in the north, Iran in the east, Jordan and Syria in the west, and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the south. Its capital city is Baghdad, and it has a population of more than 44 million people. Iraq is a federal parliamentary republic, with a president (Abdul Latif Rashid), and also a prime minister (Mohammed Shia al-Sudani). From 1979 to 2003, the country was ruled by President Sadaam Hussein, who suppressed any opposition, often violently.

Iraq has one of the largest oil reserves in the world. According to the IEA it ranks third—after Saudi Arabia and Iran—for countries that supply the largest percentage of the world’s oil.¹ According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the United States is the world’s top oil consumer, consuming 20 percent of the world’s total. China ranks second, at 15 percent, and India third at 5 percent.²

Chemical Weapons

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) provides the definition of a chemical weapon. It says, “A Chemical Weapon is a chemical used to cause intentional death or harm through its toxic properties. Munitions, devices and other equipment specifically designed to weaponise toxic chemicals also fall under the definition of chemical weapons.”³ There are a number of different types of chemical agents that are used in chemical weapons. Choking agents irritate the nose, throat, and lungs; blister agents affect the skin, eyes, and respiratory tract; blood agents reduce the ability of the body’s cells to use oxygen, and nerve agents affect the nervous system. Chemical weapons are often classified as weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security defines a weapon of mass destruction. It says, “A weapon of

¹ <https://www.iea.org/countries/iraq/oil>

² <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=709&t=6>.

³ <https://www.opcw.org/our-work/what-chemical-weapon>

mass destruction is a nuclear, radiological, chemical, biological, or other device that is intended to harm a large number of people.”⁴ The use of chemical weapons is prohibited under the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, however, some countries do possess chemical weapons.

Chemical warfare was first used by the German army in World War I. There have been a number of international attempts to prohibit these weapons since then. In 1988, Iraq used chemical weapons to attack Iraqi Kurds in the north part of the country. It is believed that up to 5,000 people were killed, and many of those who survived had lasting health problems.

The United States has also manufactured chemical weapons in the past. According to the CDC, “From World War I to 1968, the United States produced and stockpiled chemical weapons to deter other countries from using similar weapons. The amount stored reached nearly 40,000 tons stockpiled in bulk or as assembled weapons at nine sites in the United States.” It says, “In 1997, the United States ratified the United Nations International Chemical Weapons Convention treaty, agreeing to destroy its stockpile of aging chemical weapons by April 29, 2007. However, the deadline was extended, and destruction was completed in 2023.”⁵

The Chemical Weapons Convention

The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, also known as the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), is an international treaty intended eliminate chemical weapons worldwide. Signatories are not allowed use chemical weapons and are required to destroy any that they have. The treaty is widely considered to be a success. It opened for signatures in 1993 and went into force in 1997. OPCW explains, “The Convention aims to eliminate an entire category of weapons of mass destruction by prohibiting the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer or use of chemical weapons by States Parties.”⁶ It reports that 193 states have committed to the convention.

The treaty is administered by OPCW. This organization is headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands. In 2013 the organization was awarded the Noble Peace Prize for its efforts to eliminate chemical weapons.

Gulf War

In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and quickly defeated and occupied this nation. It was widely believed that the goal of the invasion was to acquire Kuwait’s large oil reserves. The invasion was widely condemned by the international community. The UN Security Council imposed economic sanctions against Iraq and also demanded that Iraq leave Kuwait. After Iraq refused, a U.S.-led

⁴ <https://www.dhs.gov/topics/weapons-mass-destruction>

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/chemical-weapons-elimination/about/index.html>

⁶ <https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention>

coalition forced Iraq out of Kuwait in a war known as the Gulf War, which took place between 1990 and 1991.

Sanctions against Iraq remained in force until 2003, with the goal of forcing Iraq to disarm and pushing its leader Saddam Hussein out of power. The sanctions caused widespread shortages in Iraq, including of food and medicine.

Invasion of Iraq

Following the Gulf War, the United States and some other countries continued to worry about Sadaam Hussein's power, and also that the country was amassing weapons of mass destruction. These worries became more pronounced after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In a 2002 speech, U.S. President George W. Bush referred to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "axis of evil." UN weapons inspectors were sent to Iraq in 1991, in 1998, however, Iraq stopped cooperating with inspectors and the inspectors left.

In February 2003, the United States asked the UN Security Council for approval of military action against Iraq, but the council did not give approval. Countries in opposition included Canada, Mexico, Germany, and France. The United States led a multi-national coalition in an invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. The coalition included troops from the United Kingdom, Australia, and Poland. It quickly overwhelmed Iraqi forces, and on May 2 U.S. President George W. Bush declared that major combat operations in Iraq were over. A provisional government was established there, with elections occurring in 2005. Saddam Hussein was captured on December 14, 2003. He was tried and hanged in 2006. However, throughout the U.S. occupation of Iraq there was ongoing violence caused by insurgents.

After the invasion, it was eventually revealed that there were no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In a 2004 speech to congress, former U.S. weapons inspector David Kay said, "It turns out that we were all wrong."⁷ In 2011, the last U.S. troops left Iraq. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of people died, and many more were wounded and displaced in the 2003 war and the conflict that followed.

Study Questions

1. What was the goal of OPCW, as explained in the film?
2. What do you think might have happened if Iraq had joined the convention, and why might that have been detrimental to the United States?
3. As argued in the film, why did the United States want to go to war against Iraq?
4. What was the effect of removing Bustani from his position?
5. As explained by Bustani, why did he refuse to resign?
6. What do you think might have happened if Bustani had stayed in power?

⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2004/US/01/28/kay.transcript/>

Additional Resources

- Council on Foreign Relations, “IRAQ: Weapons Inspections: 1991-1998,” February 3, 2005.
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraq-weapons-inspections-1991-1998>
- Council on Foreign Relations, “Timeline: 2003-2001: The Iraq War.”
<https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war>
- Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, “A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq,” Pew Research Center, March 14, 2023.
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- OPCW, “Chemical Weapons Convention.”
<https://www.opcw.org/chemical-weapons-convention>
- OPCW, “What Is a Chemical Weapon.”
<https://www.opcw.org/our-work/what-chemical-weapon>
- United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, “Weapons of Mass Destruction.”
<https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/>
- World Bank Group, “Iraq.”
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq>

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