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**Sent:** Tuesday, November 08, 2011 10:32 PM  
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**Subject:** A Long-Awaited Apology for Shiites, but the Wounds Run Deep (New York Times)

BAGHDAD — As the United States ends its second war in Iraq, the legacy of the first one still haunts. The memory of the first President Bush's urging Iraqi Shiites to rebel against the government in 1991, and standing by as thousands were slaughtered, is a tragic counternarrative to the revolutions that have swept the Middle East and a torment that even now complicates relations between the countries.

In an effort to salve the long-festering wounds and to counter Iran's influence ahead of the military drawdown, the United States ambassador, James F. Jeffrey, has offered Iraq's Shiite leaders something they have heard very little of from Americans over the years since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003: remorse and humility.

In a move that analysts say is highly unusual for a top-level diplomat, Mr. Jeffrey has lately apologized to Iraqi politicians and tribal leaders in the Shiite-dominated south for the United States inaction during the 1991 popular uprising. Particularly galling for the Iraqis was that President George Bush publicly encouraged the revolt and then allowed American forces to stand by while it was suppressed by Saddam Hussein's helicopter gunships and execution squads in a bloodbath that claimed tens of thousands of lives.

The perception of American betrayal still resonates deeply in the Iraqi psyche, and explains one of this war's enduring contradictions: that even though the Shiites benefited most from the war that overturned a long reign of tyrannical Sunni rule, they never completely trusted the Americans. Meanwhile, the Middle East revolts this year have reopened the wound of 1991, with Iraqis left to wonder what might have happened if their own revolution had received the same support as Libya's did this year.

Adel Abdul Mahdi, a former vice president of Iraq and a leading Shiite politician, said he had heard the ambassador's apology, which he said was partially motivated by the sentiments unleashed in Iraq by the Arab Spring. Had Americans acted, he said, Iraq could have been spared the trauma of sanctions and Mr. Hussein's brutality, what he described as "the destruction of the country before 2003."

"At the least, from what we are facing now, this would have been a much better solution than the solution of 2003," he said. "The role of Iraq's people would have been fundamental, not like in 2003."

Amid the Arab Spring, policy makers and academics, if they consider Iraq at all, largely regard the Iraq war as a cautionary tale, a model of democracy-building to avoid. But Iraqis have tried to bill themselves as leaders of the regional revolution. Local television has shown an image of Mr. Hussein as the first dictatorial domino to fall, and journalists have claimed that the image of Mr. Hussein's hanging was the original inspiration for the young people in Egypt and Tunisia.

That may be a wishful interpretation of history, but some experts regard the 1991 uprising as the original spark.

"The uprising of 1991 was the first Arab Spring, not 2003," said Vali Nasr, a professor at Tufts University, a former Obama administration official and the author of "The Shia Revival." He contrasted the United States' action in Libya with its inaction in 1991. "It did not do for the Iraqis in 1991 what it did for Benghazi in 2011," he said.

Mr. Nasr interpreted Mr. Jeffrey's apology as an effort to bring full closure to an event that still affects the relationship between Iraq and the United States. "The reality is that the wound of what Saddam's regime did to the Shias in the south runs very deep," he said.

So deep that when asked for comment on the apology, officials and religious leaders in the south, most of whom were unaware of Mr. Jeffrey's remarks, scoffed at the notion.

"The apology of the U.S. has come too late, and does not change what happened," said Sheik Ali Najafi, a cleric who is the spokesman for Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafi, a top Shiite religious leader. "The apology is not going to bring back to the widows their husbands, and bereaved mothers their sons and brothers that they lost in the massacre that followed the uprising."

Abdul al-Haidari, a journalist in Najaf who participated in the uprising, said: "The apology does not change history. The people were exterminated in 1991 under the watch of U.S. troops, who did not move a muscle."

Mr. Jeffrey declined to be interviewed for this article. American officials stress that his remarks were an acknowledgment of past mistakes, reflecting his personal opinion, and that they did not represent an official apology on behalf of the United States government.

They describe the expressions of remorse made in the private meetings — one such gathering brought some attendees to tears, according to a person in attendance who declined to be identified because the meeting was meant to be confidential — as an effort to nurture trust with the Iraqi leadership, which is dominated by Shiites, ahead of the American military drawdown.

Mr. Jeffrey's apology is remarkable given that officials who were in the administration of the first President Bush have typically defended the decision not to intervene in the rebellion at the end of the Persian Gulf war, after coalition troops liberated Kuwait. In his recent memoir, former Vice President Dick Cheney, who was secretary of defense during that war, said American officials had worried about Iranian support of the rebels. In his own memoir, Colin L. Powell, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote that "our practical intention was to leave Baghdad enough power to survive as a threat to an Iran that remained bitterly hostile

toward the United States.”

Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the coalition commander at the time, has expressed regret for negotiating a cease-fire agreement that allowed Iraq to fly its helicopters, but has similarly suggested that supporting the rebels would have empowered Iran.

As American troops leave a war in Iraq for the second time in two decades, officials fret about Iran’s ability to influence Iraq’s leaders by recalling that lingering sense of betrayal from 1991.

“I am really certain that Iran will not find it difficult, particularly in the south, to play that mistrust against the Americans,” said Laith Kubba, a former Iraqi exile who is the director for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington.

Mr. Kubba said it would be difficult for the United States to overcome the old resentments, even if this time the country will remain engaged in Iraq’s fledgling democracy.

“The embassy is trying to tell Iraqis, ‘Trust us, we will be here even as the troops leave,’ ” he said. “And Iraqis will say, ‘Even when you were here and Saddam had his heavy weapons, you let him slaughter us.’ ”

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