Oil-for-food tale bashes U.N. irreverently

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"Be honest," Michael Soussan, a Danish-born, American-educated, 20-something staff member at the United Nations Oil-for-Food program, asks his colleague Trevor Phillips, "We're in way, way over our heads, aren't we?" "Oh, yes," Phillips replies. "Most definitely."

And they were. The largest humanitarian operation in the history of the U.N., and the largest financial scandal as well, Oil-for-Food was designed to assist 23 million Iraqis suffering from the economic sanctions imposed on their country following the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Administrators at eight UN agencies sliced up the $64 billion Oil-for-Food cake, and many of them conspired with Iraqi officials, front companies and politicians to line their pockets. Iraqi citizens received less than 50 cents of goods and services for every dollar of oil their country sold.

Now a journalist and instructor at New York University's Center for Global Affairs, Soussan was the first staff member to call for an independent investigation of Oil-for-Food. In "Backstabbing for Beginners," he provides a first-hand account, by turns irreverent, naive and iconoclastic, of "the corruption of a great vision." Soussan insists that his experience strengthened his faith in the need for international governance. His book, however, will give aid and comfort to U.N.-bashers everywhere.

"Backstabbing for Beginners" is not always reliable. Soussan does not correctly identify Roger Ailes, the head of Fox News Channel, or Hugh Shelton, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. And his assertion that as a member of Chevron's board, Condoleezza Rice "was probably aware of this dirty business," seems irresponsible.

But Soussan's revelations about incompetence and infighting at the U.N. are well-documented and deeply disturbing. Trapped in a culture in which officials look out for No. 1, initiative is risky, staff assistants turn into enemies and paranoia makes practical sense, he writes, employees at all levels learn to "hide their eyes, cover their ears and shut their mouths." To sabotage the Program Management Division of Oil-for-Food, for example, an administrator did not allow its staff access to the files of Under-Secretary Benon Savan, the director of the Office of Iraq Programs — and ordered a slower-than-dial-up-speed e-mail system that crashed four times a day.

Even more disturbing was U.N. callousness about security. Tun Myat, the head of security for Iraq — a bureaucrat from Myanmar who had "traveled extensively in hazardous areas," Soussan quips — was not much more qualified than Angelina Jolie for the job.

In 2003, Myat asked U.S. forces to vacate U.N. headquarters in Baghdad, move to the compound's outside perimeter, and allow Iraqis to search vehicles and monitor access to the building. Despite warnings of a terrorist attack, he did not raise the alertness level. And so, on Aug. 19, al-Qaida struck, killing, among others, U.N. special envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello.

The U.N., Soussan suggests, is structurally unsound. Dependent on "the lowest denominator of common interest in the Security Council," it often lacks legitimacy, morality and practicality. Intent on maintaining a position of "neutrality" in world politics, the organization cowered, unable even to adopt a definition of terrorism. Little wonder, then, that Soussan concludes that Israel's destruction of Iraq's nuclear facility in 1981 was a necessary use of force.

Has the U.N. played a constructive role in promoting peace? Can it? Focused solely on the Oil-for-Food debacle, Soussan's lips say yes-yes, but there's no-no in his heart. "What if I told you we don't really give a s--- about the starving kids out there?" he tells a kid asking about a job. Feeling guilty, he adds, "Just kidding."

He isn't.
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By Michael Soussan
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