

The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy

Part nine: American policy after the Iran-Iraq war

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This is the ninth and final article in a series on the history of Iraq and its relationship with the US. The previous articles appeared on March 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 24, 26 and 29. This article considers the divisions among American policymakers after the Iran-Iraq war and the decision to attack Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait. All quotes are from declassified national security documents made available by the National Security Archive at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv> or <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com>.

American policy at the end of the Iran-Iraq war

As the Iran-Iraq war came to an end, divisions over US policy toward Iraq came to the fore within the American ruling elite and the Reagan administration. One section, represented most prominently by the State Department, favored a continuation of attempts to improve ties with Iraq and Saddam Hussein, while another, concentrated among congressional representatives and sections of the Pentagon with close ties to Israel, sought a confrontation with the country.

Several documents produced by the State Department in 1988 and 1989 are particularly revealing. For one thing, they reveal the ruthless imperialist *realpolitik* that guides all foreign policy debates and decisions of the US ruling elite, as opposed to the standard moralistic phrases about “democracy,” “peace” and “human rights” that are inevitably disseminated for public consumption by government officials and the media.

One memo dated September 19, 1988, from Richard Murphy, the assistant secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, opposed economic sanctions on Iraq for its chemical weapons use. It noted, “The US-Iraqi relationship is...important to our long-term political and economic objectives in the Gulf and beyond. Iraq emerges from the war as a major economic and military power. Its oil reserves are second to those of Saudi Arabia. It is a disciplined, purposeful, and ruthless regime, led by a dictator who is feared and respected by his own people and others.”

Here Murphy asserted the view that the ruthlessness of Hussein was an argument for cultivating US-Iraqi relations. He further noted that over the previous decade, Iraq’s foreign policy had become more amenable to US interests. He cited Iraq’s growing accommodation with Israel as an important example of “improved behavior,” adding that US statements on chemical weapons use should avoid “Iraq-bashing.”

Another document, written in January 1989 for the incoming administration of George H. W. Bush and entitled “Guidelines for US-Iraq Policy,” elaborated on the prospective benefits to Washington of Hussein’s rightward shift. It noted, “Iraq has come through its war with Iran with great military and political power, and is aiming higher. President Saddam Hussein has the wherewithal to be a major player in

regional affairs, as a prominent member in a loose alignment of conservative Arab states featuring Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Iraq’s prestige among these nations, its vast oil reserves promising a lucrative market for US goods, and its status as a wavering Soviet quasi-client all give our bilateral political relationship importance and room for opportunity.”

A significant section of the corporate establishment saw Iraq as a lucrative market for US goods. As a State Department document dated November 18, 1988, put it, taking a harder line on Saddam Hussein would mean that “US business firms would be excluded from doing business in Iraq expected to boom as reconstruction begins—to the benefit of competitors in Europe and elsewhere.” The agricultural sector was particularly concerned with the effect of sanctions, as Iraq had become a major importer of US grain, but had begun to look to Europe and Asia for agricultural imports after the US cancelled the Department of Agriculture’s Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) agricultural subsidy program for Iraq.

Thus, despite the nearly decade-long war, Iraq was recognized by the US as a potential regional economic and military power. It had sustained its military spending and avoided an economic crisis during the war through heavy borrowing from US allies and from the United States itself. Sections of the Reagan and incoming Bush administrations saw the growing rightward trajectory of the Hussein government as a sign that Iraq could serve US interests in the region.

At the same time, sounding a new note, the January 1989 “Guidelines” cited several factors in a deterioration of US-Iraq relations, including Iraq’s use of chemical weapons that “has aroused great emotions in the US.” It added: “Iraq’s new military capabilities and aspirations, coupled with its 1970s reputation as a radical rejectionist, terrorist ‘outlaw’ state, make it an alarming prospect to Israel—and to many in the US.”

With regard to Iraq’s use of poison gas and its poor human rights record, the State Department worried that these factors provided “a convenient hook for efforts to scuttle the US-Iraq relationship.” The document returned to the pragmatic character of the concern for Iraq’s human rights record later on, noting that human rights had “become the battleground for those wanting to justify severing or greatly limiting relations with Iraq.”

Ultimately, the State Department concluded that neither the authoritarian nature of the Iraqi state nor the concerns of other US allies in the region should be permitted to get in the way of a strengthening of US-Iraqi ties. “Saddam Hussein will continue to eliminate those he regards as a threat, torture those he believes have secrets to reveal, and rule without any real concession to democracy.... We should therefore be realistic and demand of Iraq what we do if its neighbors—in tune with our aim to rope Iraq into a conservative and responsible alignment in foreign

policy.”

The shift against Hussein

At the same time that the end of the Iran-Iraq war eliminated the main reason for the US to support Hussein, the crisis of Stalinist rule in the USSR—which would ultimately lead to the liquidation of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in December 1991—was depriving the Arab nationalist regimes of their main military and financial backer. This was in many ways the deciding factor in US relations with Iraq.

In the Middle East, Arab bourgeois nationalist regimes that had previously relied on the USSR to lessen their dependence on US imperialism scrambled to establish closer links with Washington. In 1989, the Arab League made a significant concession to the US by readmitting Egypt, which it had expelled in 1978 for concluding a separate peace with Israel.

In April 1990, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev told visiting Syrian President Hafez el-Assad that the USSR would no longer seek to boost Syrian military capabilities to parity with Israel. This was the prelude to the USSR’s even more momentous decision not to aid Iraq, but instead to ally itself with the US against Iraq, when in August 1990 Hussein invaded Kuwait. Syria, anxious to ingratiate itself with the US and eager to see the downfall of a longtime regional rival, ultimately joined the anti-Iraq alliance.

The US saw the growing weakness and instability of the USSR as an opportunity to advance its interests on the world stage. It seized upon the Iraqi attack on Kuwait to proclaim, in the words of the first President Bush, “a new world order,” in which Washington would be able to reshape the world in the interests of American capitalism. The right-wing columnist Charles Krauthammer declared a “unipolar moment.”

US foreign policy was about to take a sharp unilateralist and militarist turn.

The challenge that American corporations faced from rivals in Europe and Japan, which had been growing since the 1970s, could now be answered with the relatively untrammled use of the US armed forces. In the case of the Persian Gulf, the US military could be used to secure unchallenged American supremacy in the world’s most important oil-producing region, which would put Washington in a position to blackmail its oil-import-dependent European and Asian imperialist rivals.

As President George H. W. Bush would later declare, in the run-up to the 1991 Gulf war, spearheading an attack on Iraq would give the US “persuasiveness that will lead to more harmonious trading relationships.”

Under these conditions, the American ruling class felt it could take a much harder line on countries such as Iraq, especially when these countries had aspirations to become regional powers, as the Hussein regime certainly did. According to the thinking of an increasingly influential section of the American establishment, there was no need to coddle regimes like that of the Iraqi Baath Party. It would be possible to establish US domination over Iraq and its oil supplies, which would give the US unprecedented power on an international scale.

In 1989 and 1990, important sections of the US ruling elite began to make the necessary preparations for a war with Iraq. With encouragement from the CIA, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) began to exceed their OPEC oil production quotas, driving down the price of oil precisely at the point when the Hussein regime, beset by massive war debts, was obliged to rely on petroleum revenues to finance reconstruction. In the first months of 1990, the US media began regularly carrying menacing stories about Iraqi nuclear and chemical weapons capabilities.

A January 12, 1990, document prepared by the State Department planning section entitled “Thinking about a Policy for Iraq” reflected these momentous shifts in US foreign policy. It began by noting: “In the past, the US approach toward Iraq was set—almost exclusively—within an

East-West context (Baghdad Pact/Eisenhower doctrine)... Our changing relationship with the Soviet Union is altering the East/West setting.”

After stating that in the Gulf region, “For the US, the starting point is oil,” the document noted important reasons why the US could not ultimately rely on the Hussein regime as it had on the brutal monarchy of the Iranian shah during the 1970s. It said: “The US was comfortable with actively supporting the Iranian buildup in the 1970s because (1) we trusted Iran and (2) Iran was willing and able to assume the role of defender of our oil interest. The US trust in Iran was based on mutually shared perceptions on the nature of the Soviet threat, about the need to preserve the political status quo in the Gulf, and about the importance of Israel’s security.

“While the US is prepared today to act unilaterally to defend its interests in the Gulf, in an ideal world it would be preferable to do so in concert with a friendly, regional hegemon. However, none of the Gulf powers have (a) the capability to play that role and (b) share a vision of Gulf order with which we are comfortable. Iraq, for example, might meet requirement (a)—especially for the northern Gulf—but not (b). Saudi Arabia meets requirement (b) but not (a).”

The document concluded by calling for a confrontational approach to US-Iraq relations, noting that a “key objective” will be to “force Saddam to make hard choices.”

These views hardened as the Hussein regime, driven by the pressure of war debts and internal social tensions, took steps to increase its influence in the Middle East at the expense of Israel and Washington’s feudalist Gulf allies. In 1990, Hussein began regularly denouncing the Gulf states for driving down oil prices, and deployed his army near the Kuwaiti border. With these measures, he hoped to both resolve his debt difficulties and rally popular support in the Arab world, which is rife with popular hatred for the reactionary monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE.

At the same time, Hussein pursued further weapons programs and posted missiles in western Iraq, within striking distance of Israel. This was done to discourage Israel from attacking, as it had in 1981 when Israeli jets destroyed Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor.

Ultimately, in one of the most remarkable miscalculations of the late twentieth century, the Hussein regime invaded and occupied Kuwait on August 2, 1990. It did this under the assumption that the United States would not seriously oppose the move. It had reason to harbor this misconception.

Only a week before the invasion, Saddam Hussein had met with the American ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, who said, “I admire your extraordinary efforts to rebuild your country. I know you need funds. We understand that and our opinion is that you should have the opportunity to rebuild your country. But we have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait. [Secretary of State] James Baker has directed our official spokesmen to emphasize this instruction.”

In the event, the American response was quite different: the US went to war against Iraq and carried out a devastating bombing campaign. This is not the place to give a detailed account of that war or subsequent developments. Suffice it to point out that the first Gulf war represented a substantial victory for the more aggressive factions within the American establishment.

However, the first Bush administration still felt itself under certain constraints. The fate of the USSR was still uncertain, and the shift in American policy had only just begun. The father of the current president did not yet feel himself in a position to carry out a full-scale invasion and occupation of Iraq, with all of the resulting political and military commitments. Moreover, such an invasion would certainly have been opposed by Europe and the Arab states, and the US was not yet willing to jettison the United Nations and the support of the other major imperialist powers.

The failure in 1991 to send US troops into Iraq to topple the Baathist regime was interpreted by the right wing of the Republican Party as missed opportunity. The most rapacious sections of the American ruling class dedicated the next decade to ensuring that the US would never again allow its interests to be curtailed. These forces came to power with the present Bush administration.

Thus, Saddam Hussein, once a friend of the US, became an enemy. Having played its part in imposing the unpopular Iran-Iraq war on the Iraqi people so as to prevent the ferment of Iranian-style Shi'ite fundamentalism from reaching the Gulf states, his regime, with its hopes of giving the Iraqi bourgeoisie a greater role in the Middle East, became an obstacle to US interests.

Hussein's colossal miscalculation in thinking he could invade Kuwait with impunity became the gravestone of the perspective of national capitalist development in the Third World. All of the factors on which Hussein counted to prevent the US from attacking him—the support of the Soviet Stalinists, the presumed refusal of other Arab regimes to host or support a US invasion force, his history of collaboration with Washington—came to naught. Having exercised dictatorial rule with American support, having received arms with American help and American money, Hussein nevertheless saw the United States declare that the actions he had carried out with Washington's blessings required his removal.

The Iraqi people saw the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein used as the pretext for repeated American bombings of the country, a brutal sanctions regime that decimated the population, and, finally, the invasion and occupation of Iraq by US and British troops in March 2003.

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The history US-Iraqi relations examined in this series exposes the fraudulent character of all of the claims made by the Bush administration to justify its war and occupation of Iraq. Among the most cynical lies was the assertion that the war was a response to Saddam Hussein's past use and continued possession of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological weapons.

Not only have no such weapons been found, but, as this series has documented, during the period when the Iraqi regime actually possessed and used chemical weapons, it had the support of the American government. Hussein's use of these weapons against the Iranians and against Kurdish insurgents in the 1980s was treated by the Reagan administration as a diplomatic inconvenience, and not a reason for harming relations with the regime, let alone deposing Hussein.

As for the Baath Party's human rights abuses and anti-democratic policies, these were of no greater concern to the American government. Indeed, the Baath Party's rise to power and Hussein's personal rule were, in part, the result of covert US support. The regime's repression of the Iraqi population—and particularly the socialist movement—was welcomed by the American state.

Underlying the history of US relations with Iraq and the Middle East as a whole, and figuring most centrally in the unstated aims of the present war, is a factor that has been largely ignored by the media and suppressed by the American political establishment: control of the region's oil. Far from being a non-factor, it is precisely this question that has remained constant through all of the twists and turns of American policy toward Iraq.

The oil question is not only a matter of vital economic concern to US energy conglomerates and the corporate elite as a whole; it has vast implications for the overall geopolitical and strategic position of American imperialism. The great power that dominates the world's oil resources can exercise massive leverage against all imperialist rivals.

During the 1980s, the American ruling class saw support for Iraq as a way of opposing the Iranian revolution and securing the position of the oil-rich, pro-American monarchies in the Gulf. After the fall of the Soviet

Union, the United States saw an invasion of Iraq as an opportunity to seize direct control over the country's oil reserves.

The history of US-Iraq relations is a history of imperialist diplomacy. It is the history of the subjugation of a small country and its subordination to the interests of the most powerful and ruthless ruling class in the world, a process that was aided by a weak and dependent national bourgeois elite. The suppression of this history by the American media and political establishment—including both the Democratic and Republican parties—underscores the fact that the policy of the US toward Iraq has been conducted in the interests not of the American people, but of a financial aristocracy that employs lies, military violence and repression as instruments for the exploitation of the working masses both abroad and at home.

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