

The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy

Part one: Monarchical Iraq and the growth of social antagonisms

Joseph Kay
12 March 2004

[Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#) | [Part 4](#) | [Part 5](#) | [Part 6](#) | [Part 7](#) | [Part 8](#) | [Part 9](#)

The capture of Saddam Hussein in mid-December was greeted by a flurry of self-congratulation in the media and the Bush administration. At the same time, the possibility of a future trial for the former president of Iraq has caused a great deal of nervousness within the American ruling elite. Above all, there is a fear that a trial of Saddam Hussein could open up a discussion into his close relations with the United States during the period when he committed many of the crimes with which he has been charged—crimes that have been used by the US to justify its invasion of Iraq.

Nowhere in the mass media is there a serious examination of the history of Iraq, and yet an understanding of this history is the basic prerequisite for understanding the war and occupation of the country. This is the first in a series of articles that will examine this history, with a particular focus on the period of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. The first three articles will discuss the political, social and historical context within which the Iran-Iraq war unfolded.

Recently declassified national security documents paint a damning picture of US relations with the Saddam Hussein regime during the 1980s. The American government and its occupying forces in Iraq are now accusing Hussein of war crimes for his use or alleged pursuit of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. However, at the time Iraq actually used these weapons—during the Iran-Iraq war that lasted from 1980 to 1988—the regime in Baghdad had the backing of the Reagan administration—an administration composed of many of the same people who presently occupy leading positions in the Bush administration.

How is it possible to understand the shift that took place in the American attitude toward Iraq, transforming former president Hussein from an ally and asset into someone depicted by the Bush administration as one of the most dangerous enemies of world peace?

This transformation cannot be understood as the product of a sudden revelation on the part of Bush, Vice President Cheney or Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. Rather, the evolution of Washington's attitude toward Iraq and the Saddam Hussein government can be comprehended only within the framework of fundamental shifts in American foreign policy, shifts that have deep historical, social and economic roots.

Social conflicts and the Iraqi monarchy

The origins of modern Iraq, as with much of the contemporary Middle East, lie in the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, which ended in 1918. For three centuries prior to the world

war, Iraq was the easternmost province of the Ottoman Empire, which was centered in Constantinople (now Istanbul in modern Turkey).

During the war, the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany, and in the war's aftermath, the victors—Britain and France, in particular—parceled out the formerly Ottoman-controlled Middle East between them. Iraq was included in the sphere of influence of the British Empire, which supported the ascension of King Faisal I, a member of the Hashemite monarchical family. Britain had long-standing interests in the region. The British, prior to the war, had sought to prop up the Ottoman Empire not only for commercial relations but also as a means of counteracting Russian influence and safeguarding passage to England's most important colony, India.

Prior to the 19th century, the region's social structure—outside of a few major cities, including Baghdad—was organized primarily around relatively isolated tribal confederations. Under the influence of the British in the 19th and 20th centuries, the region experienced a gradual growth of modern capitalist property relations.

This period witnessed “the spread of communications, the growth of towns, the diffusion of European ideas and techniques, the advance in the countryside of the territorial at the expense of the kinship connections, the breakdown of the subsistence economy and self-sufficiency of the tribes, and the greater interrelatedness of the various parts of the society,” even though the traditional relations continued to exist side by side with these new forms. [1]

These social transformations are critical in understanding the course of Iraq's history during the 20th century. Like many countries that entered the 20th century with limited capitalist development, the primitive, semi-feudal social relations that existed within Iraq were placed under intense strain by the new pressures exerted by world capitalism. These tensions took on an added significance with the discovery in the early part of the century of a natural resource that came to play an absolutely critical role in world economy—oil.

During the period of its reign (1921-1958, interrupted by a number of coups that occurred in the 1930s and 1940s), the Iraqi monarchy faced the twin and conflicting tasks of forging a unified state out of the various tribal and sectarian entities and at the same time subordinating the whole of society to the interests of the British Empire. The overcoming of tribal divisions and the development of modern economic life meant the growth of the cities and the classes that populated them: a national bourgeoisie, a growing intelligentsia, and, above all, a rapidly expanding working population. The population of greater Baghdad rose from about 200,000 in 1922, to 515,459 in 1947, to 793,183 in 1957.

Limited national economic development—which took the form of the growth of the oil industry, of the shipyards and of manufacture—brought into existence layers of the population opposed to the subordination of the

entire country to British imperialism and the narrow elite within Iraq that benefited from the imperial system.

In the interests of preserving the *status quo*, therefore, the monarchy relied heavily on the tribal chiefs, large landholders and the richest sections of the merchant class. The historian Hanna Batatu notes: “By its commitment to a rural social structure, which condemned the majority of the inhabitants of the country to depressed conditions and which, therefore, constituted a serious impediment to the progress of the Iraqi economy as a whole, the monarchy itself became, in a crucial sense, a retarding social factor.” [2] That is, the monarchy had become a deep impediment to further economic development.

The economic interests and political dominance of this reactionary elite depended upon the protection of British imperialism. During the post-World War II period, the monarchy—and a series of premiers, including the much-hated Nuri al Said—relied heavily on the British to repress a number of uprisings of the urban population—in 1948, 1952, and again in 1956.

The opposition to the monarchy and British imperialism consisted at times of movements led by the national bourgeoisie—a propertied section of the population that sought more extensive economic development. During the 1930s and 40s, this took the form of coups led by nationalist military officers drawn from middle layers of the population.

The national bourgeoisie also wanted to foster conditions in which it could receive a greater portion of the surplus generated by the Iraqi working class—a surplus that was going primarily to foreign corporations. These interests were advanced, for example, in constraints placed upon foreign oil corporations in the exploitation of Iraqi petroleum.

The national bourgeoisie was nevertheless quite weak, and ultimately dependent upon world capitalism for the export of goods and—as would become clear, particularly in the 1980s—for economic and military aid. Moreover, it existed in perpetual fear of the working class—particularly strong and well organized in Iraq—which threatened at every turn to take the movement against imperialism beyond the boundaries of capitalist property relations.

Military coups and the betrayals of the Communist Party

The growth of the working population in Iraq was reflected in the rapid expansion of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). In spite of the enormous betrayals of Stalinism beginning in the 1920s, the Communist Party was seen by many workers in Iraq and elsewhere as the representative of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the international socialist movement. The ICP began to gain influence in Iraq during the 1920s and 1930s. It was the most influential political party for much of the period following the Second World War.

The history of post-war Iraq—including the rise of the Baath Party—is intimately bound up with the history of the ICP. Throughout the twists and turns in the policy of the Iraqi Stalinists, one constant was manifest: the insistence that the very powerful movement of the working class of the country be channeled behind the “democratic national bourgeoisie,” no matter how undemocratic this bourgeoisie might, in reality, be. In this way, the ICP helped to solidify the domination of the national capitalist class, emasculating the socialist movement supported by so many Iraqi workers.

The ICP in general supported the series of military coups that took place during the 1930s and 1940s, even in those cases where the officers did not challenge monarchical rule. Support for the coups was justified on the premise that they were anti-British in character, and therefore progressive. For example, the ICP backed the rule of Bakr Sidqi, who captured the

premiership in 1936. It did not declare opposition to him until March 1937, when he promised to “crush any movement—Communist or otherwise—which infringes upon the throne.”

The ICP was the main prop supporting the rule of Rashid Ali Gailani, who captured power in 1941, despite his association with extreme right-wing and anti-Semitic elements. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the ICP swung behind the British, which meant, in practice, supporting the pro-British monarchy. Perhaps the most damaging position it took, however, was its decision—in line with Soviet policy—to support the partition of Palestine and the creation of Israel in 1948.

In spite of these betrayals, the ICP was influential in the main centers of working class strength: the factories of Baghdad, the oil extraction facilities in Kirkuk and elsewhere, the docks of Basra. The ideals of socialism exerted such an influence amongst the workers of Iraq that bourgeois nationalists and even some extremely conservative parties adopted the mantle of socialism to gain popular support. This was true throughout the Arab world during the period. General Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt—one of the most popular figures in the region for much of the 50s and 60s—presented himself as a socialist despite his anti-communist policies.

The strength of socialist ideas can be explained by the extraordinary social inequality, on the one hand, and the weakness of the national bourgeoisie on the other. Social inequality increased during the oil boom of the 1950s, when the laboring population and middle class layers were hit hard by inflation, while expanding profits accrued to a tiny section of the population.

The Iraqi Baath party at this time was inconsequential, and the pan-Arab, anti-British nationalists behind the 1941 coup were discredited by their association with fascism. No bourgeois nationalist party was able to gain any real mass following, since the native capitalist class was more fearful of the radicalism of the working population than the repression of the monarchy. Whenever the national bourgeoisie took power, it invariably instituted anti-democratic measures to put down strikes and dismantle working class organizations.

To be continued.

Notes:

1 Batatu, Hanna, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1978, p. 11

2 *Ibid.*, p. 32



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)