

The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy

Part two: The Iraqi nationalist movements, the permanent revolution, and the Cold War

Joseph Kay
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This is the second in a series of articles examining the history of Iraq and its relations with the United States. The first article, posted March 12, discussed the social relations of the country and its history up to the 1950s. This part deals with the post-World War Two history of Iraq within the context of the Cold War.

The permanent revolution in the Middle East

The basic social conditions that characterized Iraq during the first half of the twentieth century were by no means unique to that country. The growth, alongside of old social relations, of modern industry tied to export; the consequent growth of the working class; the weakness of the bourgeoisie and its ultimate dependence upon the major imperialist powers; the inability of the bourgeoisie to carry out a genuinely democratic revolution against the monarchy and the old feudal structures—these were features common to many less developed countries in which capitalist relations developed under the domination of foreign powers.

It was an analysis of such social relations that formed the theoretical foundation for the Russian Revolution of 1917. The analysis was developed by Leon Trotsky in his theory of permanent revolution, which holds that in the modern epoch of imperialism, in countries with a belated capitalist development, the historical tasks that were associated with the bourgeois democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries cannot be carried out by the national capitalist class. The weakness of this class implies that these tasks—the elimination of backward social relations, the end of national oppression, the institutionalization of democratic rights—can be realized only through a revolution of the working class. Such a revolution must of necessity merge with the struggle for socialism—that is, the continuation of private ownership of the means of production is incompatible with a genuine struggle against imperialism and political reaction.

At the same time, given the relative economic backwardness of these countries, the success of the socialist revolution depends upon its extension into the more economically developed countries—that is, the centers of imperialism, above all, Europe and the United States. A movement that seeks national independence within the framework of world capitalism cannot succeed, whether the movement advances the Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country” or seeks to promote internal

capitalist development on the basis of state control of key resources, such as oil. A nationally-based independence movement would ultimately meet with defeat at the hands of imperialism—and for the latter half of the twentieth century, this meant the United States—which would intervene militarily where it could not realize its aims through economic pressure. This intervention is a political expression of the subordination of every national economy to the world capitalist system, a system that by its very nature can be transformed only on a world scale.

The history of the past half-century entirely confirms—if only in the negative—the theory of permanent revolution.

At no point during the post-war period were any of the nationalist movements of the Middle East capable of consistently carrying out the basic democratic and national aims they proclaimed for themselves. Movements such as that led by General Gamul Abdul Nasser of Egypt and the Baath parties in Syria and Iraq derived much of their popular support from their stated program of the unification of the peoples of the Middle East. This often took the particular form of Arab nationalism, though there was the general feeling among wide sections of the population throughout the Middle East—Arab, Persian, Kurdish, etc.—that the only way to oppose imperialist domination was by overcoming the artificial and detrimental state barriers imposed after World War I and World War II.

The national bourgeoisie proved itself incapable of carrying out this unification, which for the bourgeoisie was always subordinated to and ultimately founded upon the narrow interests of the ruling classes of the various countries. The attempt in 1958 to unify Syria and Egypt in the United Arab Republic fell apart after only three years. Nasser saw the UAR as a means of solidifying the dominance of the Egyptian bourgeoisie in the region, a situation that the other governments—even those with which Egypt was allied—could not accept.

Even after the Baath Party came to power in both Syria and Iraq, the two countries were unable to come together. Indeed, they were the most bitter of enemies. By the time Saddam Hussein came to power in late 1970s, Iraq had largely abandoned the rhetoric of pan-Arabism in favor of Iraqi nationalism.

The fracturing and disintegration of the “Arab revolution” was a reflection of the fact that real unification could be based only upon a fundamental social transformation that transcended the competing interests of different factions of the capitalist class, tied in different ways to their own landowning classes and to imperialism and the world market.

When it came to the implementation of democratic reforms, the national bourgeois movements fared no better. In spite of limited social programs instituted by nationalist governments such as the Baathist regime in Iraq, internal conflicts—particularly that between the working class and the

capitalist class—did not lessen. The fear and hostility of the bourgeoisie toward the working class meant that genuine democratic mechanisms could not be tolerated. It is no accident that the nationalist movements invariably relied heavily on the military and the police: any independent mobilization of the working class that threatened the interests of bourgeois rule was met with repression.

A deterrent on US military intervention

In understanding the history of Iraq within this framework, it is necessary to take into account the peculiar character of the post-war international political and economic system, which at first glance appeared to allow for the success of national independence movements led by the bourgeoisie.

The overall geo-political situation of the Cold War period and the constraints on US foreign policy related to the existence of the Soviet Union allowed nationalist governments in smaller countries to gain a certain degree of independence by playing off the two superpowers and appealing to the Soviet Union for economic and military aid.

Rather than direct intervention, American foreign policy was often forced to employ different means for asserting control: covert operations and assassinations, financial aid, assistance in repressing popular uprisings, the cultivation of local nationalist regimes.

In the Middle East, US policy was concretized in the Eisenhower doctrine and the Baghdad Pact. The Eisenhower doctrine pledged military support by the US to any Middle East government against “overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international communism.” The Baghdad Pact was an alliance formed in 1955 between Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and Britain under the aegis of the United States. These countries of Central Asia and the Middle East were intended to be the basis for US influence in the region and a bulwark of support against the Soviet Union.

The policy of the United States was not, however, simply reducible to opposition to the Soviet Union. The US government was determined to put down any socialist or left-nationalist movement. There was a deep fear, not only of the immediate damage that such movements would inflict upon US and British interests, but also of the danger of a broad socialist movement of the working class in Iran, Iraq and other countries—a movement that could severely undermine imperialist interests.

Thus, in 1953 the CIA and British intelligence collaborated in overthrowing the nationalist regime of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran after he nationalized the oil industry in that country. With the restoration of the deeply unpopular Shah, Iran became a key American client up until the revolution of February 1979.

Nevertheless, countries like Egypt and Iraq were temporarily able to stave off American intervention by playing upon their relations with the Soviet Union. The independence afforded to smaller countries by the existence of the Soviet Union was always of a limited character, subject to the vicissitudes of Soviet foreign policy and its maneuvers with the US.

Even this limited independence had largely evaporated by the 1980s, as the Soviet Union began to move toward capitalist restoration. By the end of that decade, any pretensions to national independence had become thoroughly discredited. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the ability of these countries to hold back the United States entirely evaporated. The collapse of the Soviet Union—the most extreme example of a program of economic autarky—was itself a product of the growing pressures of world capitalism.

The coup of 1958

It is within this international and social context that one must place the 1958 overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in a military coup led by General Abdul Karim Qasim. A bourgeois nationalist and member of the so-called Free Officers, Qasim quickly withdrew Iraq from the Baghdad Pact and opened up diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. For the first year of his rule, Qasim had close relations with the Iraqi Communist Party.

Journalist and historian Dilip Hiro notes, “Qasim’s non-aligned stance went down badly in Washington—as did his convening a meeting of the representatives of the oil-rich Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela in Baghdad in September 1960 to form the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).” [1] OPEC was a means for the oil-rich countries to exert control over world oil prices through concerted efforts to set production quotas.

Qasim also took steps to curtail the influence of foreign companies in domestic oil extraction. The main company operating in Iraq at that time was the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC), a joint venture between British, French, Dutch and American firms. Qasim moved to limit IPC’s scope of operations and at the same time set up the Iraq National Oil Company in 1961. Qasim sought thereby to ensure that a greater portion of the surplus from oil extraction stayed within Iraq, and he used the existence of the Soviet Union as a means of extracting concessions from the US and foreign companies.

True to its policy of unconditional support for the Iraqi national bourgeoisie, the Iraqi CP backed Qasim fully for the first year of his rule. When, after solidifying his rule, Qasim began to take action against CP-dominated organizations and trade unions, the party responded by shifting further to the right. It dropped any pretense to socialist policies and did not seriously oppose Qasim, even as he permitted right-wing violence against its own organizations.

As a result, the Iraqi CP lost much of the support it had retained amongst wide sections of the Iraqi population. This was the logical outcome of the Stalinist policy. Rather than advancing an independent socialist program for the working class, the Stalinist parties in every country took the position of unconditional support for one or another faction of the national capitalist class. When this class decided to turn against it, the CP was absolutely defenseless. As a consequence of these betrayals, the Iraqi working class itself was left without an organized means of resistance, paving the way for the decades-long rule of the Baath party.

The coup of 1963

The Baath party—which by the 1960s had become a major political force in the country—was deeply opposed to the rule of Qasim. Its differences with the ruler reflected divisions within the Iraqi capitalist class, particularly over relations with the Soviet Union and Egypt. In particular, the Baathists favored closer ties with Egypt, a more distant relationship with the Soviet Union and a sharper attack on the Iraqi Communist Party.

The rise to power of the Baath Party to power in the 1960s was at the same time bound up with international conditions, particularly the attempts by the United States to ensure its control over the region. Qasim’s moves to regulate oil exports and his cordial relations with the Soviet Union and the Iraqi Communist Party were seen as a direct threat to American interests. From the very beginning of his rule, therefore, the CIA worked to have him assassinated. One failed plot is reported to have involved a poisoned handkerchief.

The aim of the Americans was to set up a regime that would be more sympathetic to US interests and take a harder line in suppressing protests from the working class. Because of its hostility to the Communist Party, the Baath Party was looked upon with relative favor by the American government. Saddam Hussein, in particular, was seen as an individual with whom it was possible to do business. Hussein had been involved in 1958 in the assassination of his brother-in-law, a CP member. He had also taken part in a 1959 assassination attempt against Qasim.

In 1963, a successful CIA-backed coup led by the Baath Party and a section of the military was followed by the murder of some 3,000 to 5,000 members of the Communist Party and other figures within the working class movement and the trade unions. Though power at first fell from its hands amidst internal differences, another coup in 1968 allowed the Baath Party to consolidate its rule, which it held until the American intervention in 2003.

The violence directed against the Iraqi CP in 1963 marked a shift to the right on the part of the national bourgeoisie in Iraq. Despite its enormous betrayals, the CP still had wide influence within the working class organizations of the country, and at its most fundamental level, it was against the working class that the violence was directed. The repression was carried out by right-wing supporters or allies of the Baath Party—centered particularly within the officer corps—who eventually took full control of the state under Abdul Salam Arif.

Arif was not a Baathist member. However, his views were in general sympathy with those of the party, which occupied the most influential posts during the first year of his rule.

Upon seizing power, Arif declared: “In view of the desperate attempts of the agent-Communists—the partners in crime of the enemy of God Qasim—to sow confusion in the ranks of the people and their disregard of official orders and instructions, the commanders of the military units, the police, and the Nationalist Guard are authorized to annihilate anyone that disturbs the peace. The loyal sons of the people are called upon to cooperate with the authorities by informing against these criminals and exterminating them.” [2]

The new rulers combed the districts that had offered resistance to the coup—generally, the poorer districts and those with widespread CP support—and made mass arrests. The leaders of the CP were tortured and hanged.

According to King Hussein of Jordan, these actions had the support of American Intelligence. “Numerous meetings were held between the Baath party and American Intelligence, the more important in Kuwait...on 8 February [1963] a secret radio beamed to Iraq was supplying the men who pulled the coup with the names and addresses of the Communists there so that they could be arrested and executed.” [3]

The period of the rule of the brothers Arif—Major General Abdul Rahman Arif took the presidency after his brother died in a helicopter crash in 1966—was characterized above all by the growing dominance of the military over the affairs of state. Being weak, the national bourgeoisie was unable to put forward any consistent or unified policy, and thus politics tended to fracture along narrow regional loyalties. In proportion to its lack of popular support, the bourgeoisie tended increasingly toward one-party rule and military-police dictatorship.

To be continued.

Notes:

1. Hiro, Dilip, *Iraq: In the Eye of the Storm*, Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, New York, 2002.
2. Batatu, Hanna, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1978, p. 982
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 985-6





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