The diplomacy of Imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy

Part four: Iraq in the 1970s and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War

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This is the fourth in a series of articles on the history of Iraq and its relations with the United States. The first three articles, posted March 12, March 13 *and* March 16, *discussed the social and political history of Iraq up to the rise to power of the Baath Party in the late 1960s. This article examines the background to the eruption of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 and the changing attitude of the US to the two countries. Subsequent articles will examine documents relating to US support for the Saddam Hussein regime throughout the nearly decade-long conflict.*

Though American intelligence had had a hand in the events that led to the rise of the Baath Party in the 1960s, the relations between the US government and the Baathist regime in the 1970s were strained. Both the domestic and international policies of the country were often at odds with the interests of American imperialism.

In spite of its generally anticommunist outlook and the severe repression meted out to the Communist Party in 1963, the regime led by the Baath Party was nationalist in outlook and pursued policies designed to decrease its dependence upon the United States and Western corporations. This meant a more cordial relationship with the Soviet Union, whose support allowed Iraq to gain leverage against the US.

The government's nationalization of the foreign-owned Iraq Petroleum Company in 1972 was bound up with support from Moscow, which was aiding in Iraq's domestic oil extraction. In the same year, the two countries signed a 20-year Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in which they pledged to "develop cooperation in the strengthening of their defense capacity." Iraq made significant military purchases from the Soviet Union, which quickly became its chief arms supplier. As part of its closer relations with Moscow, the regime temporarily patched up its differences with the Iraqi Communist Party, which in 1972 joined with the Baath Party 's National Patriotic Front and participated in the cabinet.

The nationalization of oil—and the actions of OPEC to curb the supply of oil on the world market—dramatically increased the government's revenues during the 1970s, allowing it to pursue domestic development projects and increase social services to a beleaguered and otherwise hostile population.

Iraq also came into conflict with the United States through its opposition to Israel and its support for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Its anti-Zionism was, however, more verbal than practical. At two key points—the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan by King Hussein in 1970 and the Arab-Israeli war of 1973—Iraq did very little to support the Palestinians or the other Arab states.

In asserting its interests, the US relied heavily on its main allies in the region: Saudi Arabia, Israel and Iran. Iran in particular, which was still ruled by the much-hated, despotic Shah, was used as a means of pressuring Iraq. US President Richard Nixon announced in May 1972 that the Shah could buy any non-nuclear weapons it wished from the United States. This was an unprecedented offer to what the administration considered a key "regional pillar."

Support from the US bolstered Iran as it negotiated centuries-old territorial conflicts with its neighbor, Iraq. Chief among these was control over the Shatt al Arab waterway (the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers), which forms part of the boundary of the two countries and empties into the Persian Gulf. The importance of control over the Shatt al Arab was heightened by the growing importance of oil, which could be shipped down the river to the Gulf. In 1969 Iran abrogated a 1937 treaty that effectively gave Iraq control of the waterway and began asserting its own control. The dispute was not resolved until 1975—to Iraq's detriment.

In 1971, with British support, Iran took over three islands in the Gulf that were critical to the passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. Seeing this as a move to assert greater control of oil shipments, Iraq broke off diplomatic relations with Iran and Britain. (It had already broken relations with the US after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.)

Iran also exerted pressure on Iraq in other ways, in particular through the support—financially and militarily—that it gave to Kurdish insurgents near the northern border between the two countries. The grievances of the Kurdish minority with the Arab-dominated Iraqi government were long-standing. In March 1970, the Baathist government had struck a deal with the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) that called for the creation of a Kurdish-run autonomous region in the north. The agreement fell apart in 1974 when Baghdad refused to include in the region Kirkuk and other Kurdish-majority oil-rich provinces. About three-fifths of Iraq's oil revenue came from the Kurdish region.

The resumption of hostilities between the Kurds and the Iraqi government was encouraged by the United States, and the CIA collaborated with Israel and Iran in ensuring that the insurgents had a steady supply of weapons. The insurgency was only halted after Iraq signed the Algiers Accord with Iran in 1975, which conceded the *thalweg* principle (that the border between Iran and Iraq ran through the median of the deepest channel of the Shatt al Arab).

The Iranian revolution and the shift in US policy

After the signing of the Algiers Accord, the principle domestic opposition to the Iraqi regime came from the Shia Muslim population, which in spite of its majority position in the country had always been

poorly represented in the government. There was a class component to the conflict, as the most exploited sections of the population were generally Shia.

Riots by the Shia population in 1977 created a division within the Baath Party that manifested itself in a conflict between President Bakr and Saddam Hussein, who was then vice president. Hussein favored strict repression of the Shia opposition groups, particularly Al Daawa, which was leading the revolt, while Bakr favored a more conciliatory position.

These divisions were exacerbated by the Iranian revolution of February 1979, which marked a fundamental change in the dynamics of the region and the attitude of the US. For the US, the danger lay not simply in the possible spread of the Islamic Revolution. This revolution was itself the product of explosive conditions created by the massive social inequality that pervaded, and still pervades, all the Gulf states. The Ayatollah Khomeini was able to exploit these tensions—and the treachery of the Communist Tudeh Party—to overthrow the Pahlavi monarchy and implement a political program of (Shia) Islamic Fundamentalism. For its oil supplies, the US was particularly reliant upon Saudi Arabia, which experienced wide-scale riots in Shia regions in late 1979 and 1980, threatening the rule of the monarchy. Bahrain and Kuwait faced similar internal conflicts.

With the Iranian revolution came a confluence between the interests of US imperialism and those of the Baathist government. The Khomeini regime saw Hussein and the Baath government as one of its principle enemies and encouraged the Shia opposition within Iraq. The US wanted to contain and, if possible, reverse a growing threat to its oil supplies. After US intelligence failed to overthrow the Khomeini regime through subversion, support for its rival Iraq became an attractive alternative.

Once again, a rightward shift in the Baath Party was marked by an increase in the power of Saddam Hussein. After Shia demonstrations in the south in July 1979, Hussein forced Bakr to resign and took over the presidency himself. Now the undisputed leader of the state, Hussein proceeded to carry out a purge of opponents, executing a number of Communists who had been in the government.

According to historian Dilip Hiro: “Having decimated all doubters at the highest level, Saddam Hussein carried out a widespread purge of dissident elements in trade unions, the Popular Army, student unions, and local and provincial governments.”[1] This purge was a clear signal to Washington that reconciliation was possible.

The tensions between Iran and Iraq increased throughout 1979 and the first half of 1980. Iran resumed a policy of supporting the Kurdish insurgency, and Iraq responded by increasing its aid to Iranian Kurds and Arabs in the Iranian province of Khuzustan. In March 1980, Hussein unilaterally abrogated the Algiers Agreement.

The Carter administration encouraged the dispute, which finally erupted in full-scale war in September 1980. Hiro notes: “According to the Iranian president, Bani-Sadr, in early August 1980 his government had purchased secret documents containing a detailed account of the conversations in France between several deposed Iranian generals and politicians, Iraqi representatives and American and Israeli military experts. If so, the administration of President James Carter had an inkling of Iraqi plans. By supplying secret information, which exaggerated Iran’s military weakness, to Saudi Arabia for onward transmission to Baghdad, Washington encouraged Iraq to attack Iran.” [2]

In any case, Hussein had the support of CIA-sponsored Iranian military officers who had been given refuge in Iraq. The Soviet Union was, in general, hostile to Iran as well, fearing the spread of the Islamic revolution to the Central Asian republics of the USSR. With the diplomatic situation in his favor, Hussein saw the war as an opportunity not only to check Khomeini and the Shia resistance, but also to annex parts of Iran and improve Iraq’s situation in the Gulf.

Ultimately, the Iran-Iraq war was a dispute between the national bourgeoisies of the respective countries, a dispute that intersected with the interests of the superpowers, particularly the US. Iran hoped a victory in the war would vastly increase its power in the region.

Hiro writes: “At the very least a victorious Iran would have pressured the Gulf monarchs to fall in line with its professed policy of cutting oil output to raise the price as a means of transforming the region into a hub of industry and high-level technology, and setting up a Gulf Common Market as a stepping stone to a larger Islamic Common Market. This prospect was much dreaded by the West, particularly the US which, through Saudi Arabia, exercises crucial influence on the rate of extraction and price of petroleum.” [3]

This conflict was to have disastrous consequences for the populations of both countries, which suffered from being pawns in the dispute.

A broader context

There was a deep objective logic to the Iran-Iraq war and the future course of Iraq’s domestic and foreign policy. The late 1970s saw an abrupt rightward shift in the attitude of the US on the world stage. The growing economic strains faced by the American ruling class led it to adopt a more confrontational policy at home and abroad.

The shift in American policy began during the second half of the Carter administration. In 1979, Carter announced a new doctrine (the Carter Doctrine), which pledged military intervention in the event of a threat to US interests in the Middle East. He created a Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) that could be quickly mobilized for action in the region.

American imperialism viewed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 as an opportunity to bog down its superpower rival in a long war that would deplete its resources and undermine its power. After assuming office in 1981, the Reagan administration escalated the Cold War arms buildup.

Nevertheless, direct military intervention on the part of US troops was still deeply problematic, with the Vietnam disaster only a few years in the past and war with the Soviet Union still possible. The Reagan administration, note historians Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, obtained “a hawkish reputation by supporting particular anticommunist groups, such as the Mujaheddin in Afghanistan, UNITA in Angola and the Contras in Nicaragua, *but when it came to direct military intervention there was more caution.* It either came in areas where resistance would be minimal, as in the Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983 following a coup, or was confined to air strikes, such as the 1986 raid against the Libyan capital of Tripoli” [4] (emphasis added).

Support for the Shah had previously been a main component of US policy toward the Gulf. Now the tables had turned: support for Hussein was one way the US could undermine Iran.

Growing pressure coming from the United States combined with the gradual decline of Soviet power to undermine the capacity of nationalist governments in the Middle East and elsewhere to pursue a semi-independent policy. The separate peace between Israel and Egypt in 1978 (brokered by the Carter administration at Camp David) had already marked a major step in this direction. The Iran-Iraq war was another step.

Closer relations with the US inevitably meant sharp cuts in the domestic programs that the national bourgeoisie in countries like Iraq had implemented to win some support from the working masses. In Iraq, this tendency was exacerbated by the enormous costs of the military conflict with Iran.

To be continued.

Notes:

1. Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War*, Routledge, New York, 1991. p. 30

2. *Ibid*., pp. 71
3. *Ibid*., pp. 262-3
4. Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict: 1990-1991*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993, pp. 5-6