

The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy

Part five: Donald Rumsfeld and the Washington-Saddam Hussein connection

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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the history of Iraq and its relationship with the US. The previous articles were posted on March 12, March 13, March 16 and March 17. We now begin an examination of American diplomacy toward Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. During this period Washington gave increasingly open support to Saddam Hussein, despite his repeated use of chemical weapons. All documents cited below are recently declassified national security documents, publicly available in the Iraq section of the National Security Archive at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv> or <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com>.

Though the US government had encouraged Iraq to invade Iran in 1980, it initially adopted an official position of neutrality. So long as Iraq had the upper hand or the two countries were bogged down in mutual blood-letting, Washington was content to let the conflict grind on. Arms sales were facilitated to both countries through third parties, even as the major powers maintained an official boycott on the sale of arms to the belligerents.

By 1982, however, the tide of the Iran-Iraq War was beginning to turn in favor of Tehran, whose armies had pushed the initial Iraqi invasion force out of Iran and launched, beginning in July, a series of counteroffensives on Iraqi soil, in the vicinity of Basra. Iraq's inability to continue its oil exports through the Persian Gulf—largely sealed off by the Iranian air force and navy—threatened the country with financial collapse. It also undercut Iraq's military effort, which was dependent on extensive arms buying abroad. Iraq received Western weaponry through Europe and Soviet weaponry through Egypt, both with tacit US approval.

As discussed in previous articles, the US viewed a victory by Iran as a grave threat to the stability of the region and to US oil supplies. Testimony given in 1995 by former Reagan administration National Security Council staff member Howard Teicher indicated that the US government, following a 1982 order from the Reagan White House, made official its policy of covertly aiding Iraq. According to Teicher, "President Reagan formalized this policy by issuing a National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) to this effect in June, 1982.... CIA Director Casey personally spearheaded the effort to ensure that Iraq had sufficient military weapons, ammunition and vehicles to avoid losing the Iran-Iraq war. Pursuant to the secret NSDD, the United States actively supported the Iraqi war effort by supplying the Iraqis with billions of dollars of credits, by providing US military intelligence and advice to the Iraqis, and by closely monitoring third country arms sales to Iraq to make sure that Iraq had the military weaponry required."

To facilitate US support for Iraq, the Reagan administration decided to remove Iraq from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. The list had been

set up by Carter as a means of justifying economic sanctions against countries that in one way or another opposed American interests. Once removed from the list, Iraq became eligible for loans from US government agencies such as the Export-Import Bank.

In an October 7, 1983, document prepared for Lawrence Eagleburger (then the third-ranking State Department official, holding the position of deputy undersecretary of state for political affairs), State Department officials Nicholas Veliotis and Jonathan Howe outlined the reasons for scrapping the formal US position of neutrality.

It explained the previous US neutrality position as follows: "Until now, this policy has served our objectives and interests well. It has: 1) avoided direct great power involvement 2) prevented spread of the war beyond the territory of the combatants to threaten Gulf oil supplies 3) contributed to the current military stalemate 4) preserved the possibility of developing a future relationship with Iran while minimizing openings for expansion of Soviet influence."

Although the war had previously benefited the US, according to the document, by limiting Soviet influence and keeping the region weak and divided, there was a danger that it could escalate and disturb the status quo in the region. Veliotis and Howe noted that "the Iranian strategy of bringing about the Iraqi regime's political collapse through military attrition coupled with financial strangulation seems to be slowly having an effect."

The report discounted international financial assistance as impossible, given Iraq's poor debt rating, but advocated the construction of new oil pipelines to increase the country's oil revenues. US financial support would have the effect of improving Iraq's financial standing among private lenders. The report ended by advocating a "qualified tilt" towards Iraq while "maintaining an overall posture of neutrality," in order to minimize opposition within the US and maintain the possibility of improving relations with Iran.

The use of chemical weapons

The US government faced an added political difficulty in the form of Iranian allegations, starting on October 22, 1983, that Iraq was using poison gas—a violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol to which the US, Iraq and Iran were all signatories. Publicly, the US government took the position that it did not have enough information to determine whether Iraq had used chemical weapons.

Privately, however, Reagan administration officials had no doubts that Iraq had used chemical weapons. The main question for them was how to keep boosting the Iraqi war effort, while appearing to remain committed to the Geneva Protocol.

A memo from the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs to Secretary of State George Shultz on November 1, 1983, remarked on the "almost daily" use of chemical weapons by Iraq. It said, "We also know that Iraq has acquired a CW [chemical weapon] capability, *primarily from Western firms, including possibly a US foreign subsidiary*" (emphasis added).

The author of the memo raised the concern that the continued use of chemical weapons by Iraq could undermine "the credibility of US policy on CW." Washington was concerned that if it openly permitted Iraq to use chemical weapons, then other countries—including the Soviet Union in its war against US-sponsored Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan—would use their own chemical weapons.

On November 10, 1983, a State Department background paper outlined the extent of American knowledge of Iraqi use of chemical weapons: "As long ago as July 1982, Iraq used tear gas and skin irritants against invading Iranian forces quite effectively. In October 1982, unspecified foreign officers fired lethal chemical weapons at the orders of Saddam during battles in the Mandali area... [passage redacted]. In July and August 1983, the Iraqis reportedly used a chemical agent with lethal effects against and [sic] Iranian forces invading Iraq at Haj Umran, and more recently against Kurdish insurgents."

Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds (Hussein's "own people") would later be cited by the present Bush administration as the most damning of Hussein's crimes.

In a separate transmission the same day to US officials in Baghdad, the State Department wrote: "[W]e are considering how to respond to development of the issue at the UN. We do not wish to play into Iran's hands by fueling its propaganda against Iraq." The State Department instructed US officials to tell the Iraqi foreign minister, Tariq Aziz: "We raise the issue now neither to enter into a confrontational exchange with you, nor to lend support to the views of others, but, rather, because it is a long-standing policy of the US to oppose use of lethal CW [chemical weapons]."

Throughout, Reagan administration officials viewed Iraqi use of poison gas as problematic principally because it might force them to take public positions at odds with the policy they were actually pursuing. On November 21, 1983, a briefing paper addressed to Eagleburger stated: "We have recently received additional information confirming Iraqi use of chemical weapons (CW)... It is important to make our approach to the Iraqis as early as possible, in order to deter further Iraqi use of CW, as well as to avoid unpleasantly surprising Iraq through public positions we may have to take on this issue."

Rumsfeld's first visit to Baghdad

As it attempted to negotiate the difficulties presented by Iraq's use of chemical weapons, the US government continued to push for closer relations with the regime in Baghdad. In December 1983, Donald Rumsfeld, then CEO of the Searle pharmaceutical company, was sent to Baghdad as President Reagan's special envoy for the Middle East.

Rumsfeld met with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz on December 19 and Saddam Hussein on December 20. A memo from the US interests section in Baghdad to the US Embassy in Jordan, dated December 14, 1983, stated, "A major objective in the meeting with Saddam is to initiate a dialogue and establish personal rapport. In that meeting Amb. Rumsfeld

will want to emphasize his close personal relationship with President Reagan." Included in the points to be discussed by Rumsfeld was the fact that "the USG [US government] recognizes Iraq's current disadvantage in a war of attrition since Iran has access to the Gulf while Iraq does not and *would regard any major reversal of Iraq's fortunes as a strategic defeat for the west*" (emphasis added).

In his cable to the State Department describing his visit with Aziz, Rumsfeld wrote: "I said to him that I was not here to seek diplomatic relations ... we were ready if they felt that a higher profile in the relationship would be useful in indicating to the world that relations between our countries are important, and that there are more similarities than differences.... I added that the US had no interest in an Iranian victory; to the contrary, we would not want Iran's influence expanded at the expense of Iraq."

Rumsfeld and Aziz also discussed Iraqi oil exports. Rumsfeld proposed an oil pipeline through Jordan to the Gulf of Aqaba that would be constructed by Bechtel, whose former CEO George Shultz was then secretary of state. They discussed Middle Eastern affairs and the Iran-Iraq War, in particular. In connection with efforts to prevent weapons sales to Iran and prevent the UN from issuing statements condemning Iraq, Rumsfeld wrote: "I offered our willingness to do more. [extensive passage redacted] I made clear that our efforts to assist were inhibited by certain things that made it difficult for us, citing the use of chemical weapons."

At his meeting with Rumsfeld, Hussein began by saying he had removed all legal obstacles to resuming US-Iraq diplomatic ties, but that he would wait to formally resume ties until Iraq's military situation improved, so that the move would not be interpreted as a sign of desperation. Hussein was "pleased that US understood this and left to Iraq to choose proper timing and circumstances."

In discussing his motivation for pursuing a US-Iraq partnership, he explained that he wanted such a relationship to blunt the opposition of the working class and oppressed masses, as well as to limit Soviet influence: "US, UK, France, and Japan should extend more financial assistance ... so that class conflict did not appear in ways that allowed openings for foreign interference."

The meeting touched on a variety of topics—US plans for an Iraq-Jordan pipeline and the need to protect it from Israeli attack, the common interests of the US and Iraqi governments in reducing Syria's influence, and especially its role in Lebanon's civil war, and the need to find a basis for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Neither Rumsfeld nor Hussein mentioned the issue of Iraqi chemical weapons use.

Washington's support for Iraq had the effect of increasing Baghdad's dependence on the US government. As expenses for the war soared, Iraq was forced to appeal to the US and its European and Middle Eastern allies—the Gulf monarchies and Egypt—for money and weaponry. This was made clear by Aziz in his meeting with Rumsfeld.

The notes for the meeting state that Aziz asserted, "While [Iraq] had its own ideology and convictions, it realized that it had to deal with the rest of the world as it was and understand it.... Moreover, even a socialist-revolutionary [sic] regime such as the present Baath government had to act within the context of five thousand years of Mesopotamian civilization. He emphasized Iraq's increasing maturity and ability to learn from past mistakes and experience over past 15 years.... Aziz noted that oil made [Iraq's economic progress] possible and that, as an exporter of oil, Iraq needed long-term, stable, and good relations with its customers. The West was also benefiting from Iraq's development. Over five hundred of the 800 foreign companies working in Iraq were from the West. Their participation in the economy served Iraq's needs and required Iraq to take a long range view of its relationship with such countries. Regional and international instability ran counter to Iraq's interest.... Aziz then requested US and Western help in ending the Iran-Iraq war."

Despite Aziz's bluster about the "socialist-revolutionary" character of

the Baath government, his words were a clear declaration of moderation on domestic issues and eagerness to attract foreign investment. By committing to good relations with large Western firms and oil companies, Aziz was moving away from the sorts of measures—nationalizing oil or heavy industry, the threat of an oil embargo—that had allowed the Baath regime to make concessions to the Iraqi masses and given the Arab bourgeoisie a measure of independence from US and European imperialism.

To be continued



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