

The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy

Part six: Reagan administration deepens ties with Hussein

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This is the sixth in a series of articles on the history of Iraq and its relationship with the US. The first five articles were published on March 12, March 13, March 16, March 17 and March 19. In the following article we continue our analysis of US-Iraqi relations during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. All citations below are from 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>.

Donald Rumsfeld's December 1983 visit to Baghdad to cement ties with Hussein, amidst Iranian charges of Iraqi poison gas use, was largely successful. Hussein agreed to move toward the resumption of full diplomatic relations with the United States.

US officials moved rapidly to aid Iraq's war effort against Iran. According to a January 14, 1984 telegram to US officials in Israel, an ambassador-level State Department official was "to oversee the diplomatic initiative we launched last month to curtail the flow of Western and PRC [Chinese] arms to Iran." This was to be justified by claiming that Secretary of State George Shultz had "decided to impose anti-terrorism export controls on Iran."

Iran was placed on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism, shortly after Iraq was removed. However, the US government was not throwing its entire weight behind Iraq: US imports of Iranian oil, a key source of Iranian funding, were not to be affected.

At the same time, US officials would "permit virtually all sales of non-munitions list dual-use equipment to Iraq." In addition, US officials considered selling Egypt US M-60 tanks so that the Egyptian army could free up some of its Soviet T-62s to send to Iraq.

However, developments in the Iran-Iraq war complicated the Reagan administration's maneuvering towards Hussein. The Iranian offensive of February 1984 against Iraqi positions around Basra cost the Iraqi army 9,000 soldiers, and Hussein, conscious of Iran's immense advantage in terms of population size, decided once again to use poison gas on the Iranians. A February 24, 1984 State Department briefing indicated that, before the fact, it believed Iraq might use poison gas, quoting an Iraqi military statement: "the [Iranian] invaders should know that for every harmful insect there is an insecticide capable of annihilating it whatever their number, and Iraq possesses this annihilation insecticide." Many of Iraq's poison gases were derived from chemicals obtained from Western companies with the stated goal of producing insecticides.

This time, Iraqi poison gas use was too blatant to be ignored, and the Reagan administration felt obliged to make a formal statement on March 5 that the US "has concluded that the available evidence substantiates Iran's charges that Iraq has used chemical weapons." The statement went on to declare, however, "The United States finds the present Iranian

regime's intransigent refusal to deviate from its avowed objective of eliminating the legitimate government of neighboring Iraq to be inconsistent with the accepted norms of behavior among nations..."

Angered by the US decision to finally acknowledge Iran's charges after several months, the Hussein regime issued a statement recalling the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, acidly noting that the US was "the last country with the right to speak about the ethics of war."

Despite their official stance, US officials were anxious to explain privately to the Iraqi government that this condemnation was only for public consumption. US Secretary of State Shultz personally attended a meeting between his deputy, Lawrence Eagleburger, and Iraqi representative Ismet Kattani. According to State Department notes sent by Shultz to US representatives in the Middle East, "Eagleburger began the discussion by taking Kattani aside to emphasize the central message he wanted him to take back: our policy of firm opposition to the prohibited use of CW [chemical weapons] wherever it occurs necessitated our March 5 statement condemning Iraq's use of CW. The statement was not intended to provide fuel for Khomeini's propaganda war, nor to imply a shift in US policy toward Iran and Iraq. The US will continue its efforts to help prevent an Iranian victory, and earnestly wishes to continue the progress in its relations with Iraq. The Secretary [of State, Shultz] then entered and reiterated these points."

Not satisfied that the Iraqi government had received sufficient assurances that the US government did not view its poison gas use as a major problem, Shultz sent Rumsfeld back to Baghdad in late March 1984. Fewer documents concerning Rumsfeld's second visit to Baghdad have been declassified—not surprisingly, given what they would likely show.

However, available documents make it clear that Rumsfeld's mission was to offer further assurances that Iraqi poison gas use would not constitute an obstacle to good relations with the US. His instructions, issued by Shultz, included the following: "The Secretary [Shultz] and Larry Eagleburger... emphasized that our interests in (1) preventing an Iranian victory and (2) continuing to improve bilateral relations with Iraq, at a pace of Iraq's choosing, remain undiminished...This message bears reinforcing." Rumsfeld was also tasked with assuring Iraq that the US was still interested in the construction of an oil pipeline through Jordan, with American aid.

On April 5, 1984, shortly after Rumsfeld returned from his visit to Baghdad, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 139, titled "Measures to Improve US Posture and Readiness to Respond to Developments in the Iran-Iraq War." Although it has been released in heavily redacted form, it is clear that Reagan ordered US governmental agencies to begin preparations for military intervention in the Persian Gulf and to help Iraq.

Referring to “the recent tour of the region by the Special Envoy for the Middle East [Rumsfeld],” it set in motion the following actions:

1) Sending a political mission to the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain) to secure bases and logistical support for large-scale US military operations in the region, especially to defend oil shipping in the Persian Gulf

2) Increasing US spying in the region by the CIA in coordination with the Pentagon and the State Department, with a view to protecting US military installations

3) Preparing for collaboration with the Gulf states and key European allies for military and spying operations

4) The preparation, by the State Department in collaboration with the Pentagon and the CIA, of “a plan of action designed to avert an Iraqi collapse.” The part of the directive specifying what the contents of the plan would be has been redacted.

Finally, the document specified that the US should continue its policy of issuing toothless and unspecific condemnations of Iraqi poison gas use. Despite the fact that Iran had not used poison gas to that point in the war, the directive said: “Our condemnation of the use of CW munitions by the belligerents should place equal stress on the urgent need to dissuade Iran from continuing the ruthless and inhumane tactics which have characterized recent offensives.”

Significantly, the broad lines of US policy towards the Iran-Iraq war—its intervention to protect Gulf shipping in 1987, its brief but effective unofficial entry into the war on Iraq’s side in 1988, as well as its attitude towards Iraqi poison gas use—largely followed the outline of this document.

Despite Reagan’s official decision, the US government continued to deny its support for Iraq and declare its “neutrality” in the war, so as to minimize political fallout from its support for Hussein’s dictatorship. During a November, 1984 visit of Tariq Aziz to Washington, it was announced that the US and Iraq were resuming official diplomatic ties. The US State Department instructed embassies abroad to insist that this “does not signal a change from our basic position of neutrality with regard to the Iraq/Iran war.”

What precisely the US was trying to defend in allying itself with the Hussein regime was spelled out in a top secret State Department internal paper, prepared on March 20, 1984. The paper considered the possibility of an outright Iraqi collapse before the Iranian army and discussed the consequences for US interests in the region.

“[A] possible Iraqi defeat [...] will probably lead to an Islamic fundamentalist, pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad. This is the outcome that would most destabilize the region and threaten our interests in the lower Gulf.” Significantly, the paper implied that Saddam Hussein’s remaining in power would be the best possible outcome for US interests: “The alternate scenario of a compromise settlement whereby the regime of Saddam Hussein is deposed and replaced with another secular regime which makes peace with Iran but retains its independence from Tehran would be less of a threat, although it would enhance Iran’s prestige and encourage it to assert its influence elsewhere in the region.”

The US government was concerned that an upsurge in Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf would trigger pro-Iranian Shia uprisings against the US-backed monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, etc.). Given Iran’s hostility to the US at the time, this would have seriously jeopardized the American oil supplies. The paper then lists the key US interests that would have to be defended in the case of an Iranian victory:

“Preservation of stable, friendly governments in the [Gulf] countries to protect continued access to their oil and unimpeded access to the Persian Gulf.

“Prevention of the spread of hostile Iranian influence elsewhere in the Middle East at the expense of moderate governments friendly to the US.

“Preservation of credibility of US assurances to friendly Gulf states and others that we support their security interests and are prepared to collaborate with them against Iranian and other threats.”

The paper saw the greatest threat to the Hussein regime not in military events, but rather in its unpopularity, and, in particular, the hostility of the Iraqi people to the Iran-Iraq war. It wrote: “Iran is more likely to prevail as a result of erosion or collapse of Iraq’s internal political cohesion and strength and its will to resist, rather than Iraqi military weakness, lack of weapons, or Iranian prowess. If so, external military support for Iraq may be ineffectual in preventing an Iranian victory.”

The US government’s rationale for supporting Hussein was that, by imposing a dictatorial regime and an unpopular war on the Iraqi people, Hussein kept a lid on popular hostility to the feudalists of the lower Gulf region, and thus guaranteed the stability of the US oil supply.

One final document deserves quoting. A Defense Intelligence Agency Estimative brief on Iraq from September 1984 noted that Hussein had consolidated his control over the Ba’ath Party. “Iraq is a potentially wealthy and regionally powerful state held together by the well-organized Ba’ath Party and its ruthless but pragmatic leader, President Saddam Husayn.” According to the report, “Husayn has responded to the Shia-based, Iranian-supported Dawa Party opposition by executing, jailing and deporting suspected members.”

The report went on to state that even in the event of an end to the war, Iraq was unlikely to dismantle its military machine. “This will leave Iraq with a large seasoned military force, one that likely will continue to develop its formidable conventional weapons and chemical capability, and probably pursue nuclear weapons.”

Given that the US government was later to use Hussein’s domestic repression and Iraq’s supposed pursuit of nuclear weapons as a justification for invading and occupying the country, this statement by an agency closely tied to the Pentagon is significant. Far from seeing these developments as a great threat, the report viewed them in a largely positive light, as Hussein was viewed to be a potential regional asset. “As an adjunct to its inability to end the war,” noted the Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iraq now finds itself aligned with Arab moderates and opposing Arab radicals.”

The report concluded by discussing prospects for the resumption of full diplomatic relations between the US and Iraq, which finally took place in November 1984.

To be continued



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