

The diplomacy of imperialism: Iraq and US foreign policy

Part eight: The end of the Iran-Iraq war

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This is the eighth in a series of articles on the history of Iraq and its relationship with the US. The previous installments were posted on March 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 24 and 26. This article examines the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the consequences of the war for Iraqi society. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from declassified national security documents made available by the National Security Archive at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv> or <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com>.

American military intervention in the Iran-Iraq war

As we have detailed in previous articles, the United States drew steadily closer to Iraq throughout the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Washington restored full diplomatic relations, US intelligence actively aided the Iraqi war effort, and, through ready credit guarantees and financial aid, the US insured that Iraq had the ability to continue the war despite the heavy cost. These close ties developed in spite of the increasingly brutal character of the Saddam Hussein dictatorship and Iraq's repeated use of chemical weapons.

During the final years of the war, 1987 and 1988, US involvement on the side of Iraq took on a direct military aspect. After a brief flirtation with the idea of improving relations with Iran through the illegal sale of arms to the country (details of which emerged in the Iran-Contra scandal which broke in late 1986), the Reagan administration shifted decisively behind Iraq.

This shift took place shortly after an incident which, under other circumstances, would have had the exact opposite effect: the Iraqi attack on the American ship *USS Stark*, which was stationed in the Persian Gulf. In May 1987, an Iraqi plane fired two missiles at the *Stark*, killing 37 American sailors. Saddam Hussein apologized and called it an accident. The Reagan administration accepted the apology and Iraq's explanation. Except for some lingering disputes over how much the Iraqi government should pay to compensate the families of the American forces killed, the event did not harm US-Iraq relations.

Iran alleged that the incident was not accidental at all, but a deliberate attempt by Iraq to escalate tensions in the Gulf. The purpose, Iran claimed, was to force Washington to take a more active role in guaranteeing oil shipments from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the attack did have this effect. President Reagan issued a statement declaring the commitment of the US to press Iran for a cease-fire and reiterating the American intention of securing an arms embargo against Iran. Only two weeks after the incident, Richard Armitage, the assistant secretary of defense, stated, "We

can't stand to see Iraq defeated."¹

An important aspect of US involvement was its decision in mid-1987 to agree to Kuwait's leasing of American oil tankers (a practice known as re-flagging), which were then provided with a US naval escort. In effect, the US military was guaranteeing the security of Kuwaiti oil shipments that were coming under attack from Iran. Historian Dilip Hiro notes, "After three years of striving, Iraq had finally succeeded, through its ally Kuwait, in internationalizing the conflict, with one superpower poised firmly against Iran."²

Throughout 1987 and 1988, US involvement increased steadily. In September 1987, the US Navy attacked an Iranian ship that was allegedly laying mines, killing three sailors. In October, the US targeted two offshore Iranian oil rigs in retaliation for an Iranian attack on a Kuwaiti tanker. That tanker had not been re-flagged, thus signaling a new stage in US efforts to secure oil shipments.

These actions continued despite the most serious incidence of Iraqi chemical weapons use up to that point. On March 16, 1988, Iraq used cyanide and nerve gas against the largely Kurdish citizens of the northern city of Halabja. More than 4,000 people were killed, mostly civilians.

Internal State Department documents reiterated the position of the US on chemical weapons use: that it should be opposed in general, but that Iraq's use of the weapons should not be cause for damaging relations between Iraq and the US. In late 1988, the Reagan administration opposed attempts by members of Congress to pass a resolution imposing economic sanctions on Iraq for its use of chemical weapons.

By mid-1988, Iraq was winning back much of the territory that it had lost to Iran in previous years. A victory of Iraq on the Fao Peninsula took place simultaneously with a series of US attacks on Iranian ships in the Southern Gulf.

A memo dated April 18, 1988, from the American embassy in Baghdad to the US Department of State notes the sensitivity of the Saddam Hussein regime to charges of working with the United States. "Only one of four principal [Iraqi] dailies picked up on US-Iranian altercations [in the Southern Gulf], a subject it relegated to its back pages.... Iraq is obviously sensitive to allegations it colluded with the US, and so is downplaying coverage, but there is no doubt that Iraqi officials are delighted at the bloody nose we have given the Iranians."

The event that led to the end of the war did not involve Iraq at all. On July 3, 1988, the *USS Vincennes* shot down an Iranian passenger plane, killing 290 people. While the US made the dubious claim that the plane had been mistaken for a warplane, Iran interpreted the act as a sign of a new stage in American support for Iraq. This eventually led to Iran's acceptance of a UN Security Council Resolution ending the conflict.

Iran faced a situation in which both superpowers supported Iraq. In spite of a brief shift toward Iran, the USSR continued to supply Iraq with

weapons and opposed an expansion of Iran's influence. Hiro notes that "in the wake of the Iranian airbus disaster, Tehran had two stark choices: either to escalate confrontation with America in the Gulf and/or elsewhere, or to accept unconditionally Security Council Resolution 598. It chose the latter."³

Consequences of the war for Iraqi society and politics

The war exacted a heavy price on the economy and society of both participants. An estimated 250,000 Iraqis had been killed and many more wounded over the course of the eight years. Iranian casualties were even higher.

Iraq, which entered the war with over \$30 billion in foreign currency reserves, ended it with a debt burden of \$80 billion, owed largely to the Gulf monarchies and Western powers. The oil industry had been crippled from Iranian attacks and oil revenue had declined substantially, in spite of the construction of new pipelines through Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The debt burden and growing dependence on the West for capital and imports encouraged a rightward trajectory by the Iraqi ruling elite on both domestic and foreign policy issues.

A State Department information memorandum from March 1988 made an evaluation of these tendencies as they related to US interests. The memo was entitled "Iraq's Foreign Policy: Deeper into the Mainstream," and was written by Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research Morton Abramowitz.

Abramowitz noted with approval the "moderation" of Iraqi policy over the previous decade, by which he meant its growing confluence with US interests. He traced the shift back to the 1970s, citing the Algiers Accord of 1975 and the repression of the Iraqi Communist Party in the late 1970s.

"Iraq's alignment on Palestinian issues with the 'moderate' Arab states," he wrote, "contrasts with Baghdad's former leading role in opposition to Israel.... Iraq's peaceful ties with most other area states differ from its support in the early 1970s for left-wing and subversive elements within their countries."

The war forced Iraq to move closer to the US and its allies in the Middle East. "Iraq increasingly turned to the West (initially France); an about face on Egypt followed. Iraq also became more dependent on [NATO member] Turkey, as its only oil outlet for a time. Expanded pipelines through Saudi Arabia and Turkey now give new permanence to Iraq's vital economic links with its pro-Western neighbors. Baghdad's relations with the Soviet union have not returned to the old cordiality."

On the domestic front, the Baath Party had progressively abandoned any pretext of implementing socialist policies. In the course of the war, it had been forced to scale back development programs. Some were continued, largely because there were so many elements within the Baath Party bureaucracy with a vested interest in these expenditures. To the extent that it could no longer appeal to the social grievances of the Iraqi masses, the government emphasized the importance of religion as a cohesive force. It abandoned its previous advocacy of pan-Arabism for an Iraqi nationalism centered on the interests of the Sunni elite of the north.

The prolonged war meant that an even greater role was given to the military hierarchy, and the domestic police apparatus was strengthened as an integral part of the dictatorship. During the 1980s, political criticism of the Baath Party with the intent of provoking unrest was made punishable by death. The personality cult around Saddam Hussein was promoted as the limited social base of the Baath Party withered away. Hussein's power derived from the fact that he headed the state apparatus and spoke in the interests of an increasingly rapacious and isolated bureaucracy.

To meet the needs of the Iraqi war machine and the servicing of

government debt, the Baath Party stepped up attacks on the working class. The huge proportion of Iraqi males serving in the army led to a drive to increase productivity from those who remained in the labor force.

A decree in February 1987 abolished protections previously granted to state workers, prohibiting them from joining trade unions. All workers were forced to work longer hours.

Hussein himself noted, "The purpose [of these measures] is plain: it is to increase production. For example, we want 12 hours of work every day. We'll say everybody works 12 hours per day, and there would not be people who work eight hours." He ordered officials to "pay as much attention to economic affairs as to political ideology." That is, they should not allow any pretense of socialist principles to get in the way of the exploitation of the working class.⁴

"The immediate impact of the official measures," writes Hiro, "was to reassure the numerous foreign creditors, who were pleasantly surprised to hear the finance minister say that Iraq had balanced its current trade account for the first half of 1987."⁵

These measures continued after the war. The Iraqi state began to privatize state-run industries, and some price caps on consumer goods were removed. A CIA briefing from April 1990 noted that the debt burden was "the major constraint to Iraq's postwar economic recovery.... Iraq's extensive use of foreign loans since 1982 has transformed it from one of the Third World's richest countries and net creditors into one of its problem debtors." The memo continued: "Iraq will probably continue to secure debt relief—including limited new credits—from most of its creditors, who have little other choice if they hope to receive any repayment or compete in the potentially lucrative postwar Iraqi market."

That is, Iraq would be able to manage its debt if it made concessions to foreign corporations that were competing to secure oil and reconstruction contracts.

In June 1989, Saddam Hussein met with a delegation of powerful US corporations—including the presidents of Kellogg, Brown and Root, the construction company later bought up by Halliburton, and Westinghouse—to reassure them that Iraq was committed to stable relations with the US. "The road is open to us," said Hussein, "and we want to cooperate."

A State Department transcription of the meeting states: "Saddam added that no matter what may occur...he has personally made a decision to 'cooperate with you' and this decision 'will not be shaken.'" In return, he asked the corporations and the American government to continue placing pressure on Iran.

Ultimately, these moves to accommodate American and European imperialism floundered on the determination of the American ruling class to pursue its interests more forcefully than Hussein was prepared to allow, a determination that received a giant impulse with the decline of the Soviet Union. The shift in American policy after the end of the Iran-Iraq War will be analyzed in the next and last article in this series.

To be continued.

Notes:

1. Quoted from Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War*, Routledge, New York, 1991. p. 186
2. Ibid., p. 187
3. Ibid., p. 240
4. Ibid., p. 196
5. Ibid., p. 196



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