

1990 cable details crucial meeting on eve of Iraqi invasion of Kuwait

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A previously secret US diplomatic cable from 1990, published by WikiLeaks on New Year's Day, provides a detailed account of a crucial meeting between the US ambassador to Iraq and Saddam Hussein on the eve of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

The cable was sent from the US Embassy in Baghdad to the State Department in Washington to recount a lengthy exchange between US Ambassador April Glaspie and Saddam Hussein over the mounting tensions between Iraq and Kuwait.

The meeting marked a key turning point in US policy toward Iraq and set the stage for the massive American military intervention launched by President George H.W. Bush in the first Persian Gulf War, which began barely five months later.

A transcript of the Glaspie-Hussein meeting was obtained by the *New York Times*, which reported on its contents in September 1990, and the cable itself was declassified in 1998.

The cable is dated July 25, 1990, the same day as the meeting, which had been requested by the Iraqi president, and came just one week before Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait.

The thrust of Saddam Hussein's remarks to the American ambassador was an appeal for US backing, or at least neutrality, in regard to Iraq's increasingly bitter confrontation with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. These semi-feudal sheikdoms, with Washington's backing, were deliberately undermining Iraq's economy by violating their OPEC production quotas and dumping oil on the international market at low prices.

The Iraqi government had the additional grievance of Kuwait's use of "slant drilling" to tap into Iraq's giant Rumaila oilfields, underneath the disputed border between the two countries.

Saddam Hussein expressed a sense of betrayal at the hands of both Kuwait and the sheikdom's patrons in Washington. Despite the public anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Baathist regime, the Iraqi president clearly sought to maintain an alliance with US imperialism, while invoking "services rendered" in Iraq's bloody and protracted war against Iran, which Iraqi forces first invaded in 1980.

"Saddam wished to convey an important message to President Bush: Iraq wants friendship, but does the USG [US government]?" the cable began. "Iraq suffered 100,000s of

casualties and is now so poor that war orphan pensions will soon be cut, but Kuwait will not even accept OPEC discipline. Iraq is sick of war, but Kuwait has ignored diplomacy. USG maneuvers with the UAE will encourage the UAE and Kuwait to ignore conventional diplomacy. If Iraq is publicly humiliated by the USG, it will have no choice but to 'respond', however illogical and self destructive that would prove."

At the time of the meeting, US intelligence agencies were well aware that Iraq had deployed some 100,000 troops on the Kuwaiti border.

Describing Saddam Hussein's manner during their two-hour discussion as "cordial, reasonable and even warm," Glaspie said that the Iraqi president "recalled in detail" Baghdad's decision to cement diplomatic ties with Washington, acknowledging that it had postponed the move at the start of the Iran-Iraq war "rather than be thought weak and needy."

During the course of the war, Washington facilitated the supply of loans and weapons to Iraq—including its only genuine "weapons of mass destruction"—to enable it to prevail against Iran, whose Islamic revolution was seen as the greatest threat to US interests in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East as a whole.

The Iraqi president said that there were suspicions in Iraq that Washington was "not happy to see the war end," preferring instead to see the region's two major powers bleed themselves white. He charged that there were "some circles" in Washington, particularly in the CIA and State Department, that were bent on destabilizing Iraq, but insisted "emphatically" that he did not believe President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker were among them.

Iraq, Hussein said, was "in serious financial difficulties, with 40 billion USD debts. Iraq, whose victory in the war against Iran made an historic difference to the Arab world and the West, needs a Marshall Plan." But the US and its allies were waging "economic warfare" by forcing oil prices down.

The Iraqi president reiterated his insistence that Iraq wanted US friendship, stating, "Although we will not pant for it, we will do our part as friends."

The cable quotes Glaspie as assuring Hussein that the Bush administration wanted to "broaden and deepen our relations with Iraq." She disavowed any US government responsibility for reports in the American media denouncing

Iraq, even though these were for the most part based upon government sources.

Then the US ambassador cited the Iraqi troop deployments on the Kuwaiti border and Iraqi statements describing Kuwait's oil policy as "the equivalent of military aggression" and asked, "Is it not reasonable for us to ask, in the spirit of friendship, not confrontation, the simple question: what are your intentions?"

Interrupted by a call from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Hussein returned to tell the US ambassador that he had assured Mubarak that "nothing would happen" until after a meeting in Riyadh between the Kuwaiti crown prince and Izzat Ibrahim, Saddam's deputy, scheduled just four days later.

This clear indication that war was imminent is followed by a "note," which cites a critical exchange on the issue of the disputed border between Iraq and Kuwait. It states, "The ambassador said that she had served in Kuwait 20 years before; then, as now, we took no position on these Arab affairs."

The transcript cited by the *New York Times* in 1990 was somewhat more explicit, quoting the US ambassador as telling the Iraqi president: "But we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait. I was in the American Embassy in Kuwait during the late '60s. The instruction we had during this period was that we should express no opinion on this issue and that the issue is not associated with America. James Baker has directed our official spokesmen to emphasize this instruction. We hope you can solve this problem using any suitable methods via Klibi (Chedli Klibi, Secretary General of the Arab League) or via President Mubarak. All that we hope is that these issues are solved quickly."

Subsequent events make clear that the Iraqi regime took this US assurance as a green light for Iraq to launch its August 2, 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

This was Washington's intention. The diplomatic cable provides an official record of US imperialism's deliberate setting of a trap. Within weeks of Glaspie assuring Saddam Hussein that the US "took no position" on the Iraq-Kuwait border—an artificial line drawn by British colonialism as a means of subjugating the Arab world—George H.W. Bush was talking about US imperialism drawing "a line in the sand," and the US military was putting into action long prepared plans for a savage and one-sided war aimed at crippling Iraq and establishing US hegemony in the Persian Gulf.

Washington was presented with a unique strategic opportunity, made possible by the deepening crisis and weakness of the Soviet Union, which would be dissolved by the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy little more than a year later. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had already made it clear that the USSR would no longer serve as a counterbalance to US interests in the Middle East.

Thus, utilizing the Iraqi invasion of "little Kuwait" as a pretext, the Bush administration was able to proclaim the Gulf War's goal as nothing less than a "new world order," to be

founded on US imperialism's assertion of unchallenged control of the world's most important oil reserves, energy supplies upon which its principal rivals in Europe and Asia were dependent.

The war, which destroyed Iraq's basic infrastructure with a brutal bombing campaign and achieved the longstanding goal of establishing a permanent US military presence in the region, deliberately left a dramatically weakened Saddam Hussein in power. Iraq was subjected to sweeping economic sanctions that starved the Iraqi people, while denying Washington's rivals access to the country's oil reserves.

The increasing difficulty in maintaining these sanctions against opposition from Europe and Asia fueled the growing support in the US ruling establishment for "regime change" in Iraq, which finally reached fruition with the election of George W. Bush in 2000 and the launching of the second US war against Iraq in March of 2003. Nearly eight years later, this war continues with the US occupation maintained by the Obama administration.

While previously declassified, the cable merits publication based on the insight it provides into the way in which US military aggression in the Persian Gulf was prepared and the conspiratorial character of American diplomacy. It also provides a devastating exposure of the bankruptcy of bourgeois Arab nationalism and the subservience of the regime of Saddam Hussein to US imperialism, Washington's subsequent attempts to demonize the Iraqi head of state notwithstanding.



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