

WAR WITH IRAQ: PROBLEMS AND COMPLICATIONS

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Robertson Hall
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November 21, 2002

There are many dimensions to the US-Iraq conflict. They can be looked at from varying perspectives to highlight American concerns, Iraqi objections to US behaviour and the wider consequences of a war between the two protagonists for regional stability and world order. The objective of this article is to focus on those dimensions for which ample evidence exists in the public arena. It is also to underline one major contention: that the US is partly responsible for the current crisis and a war with Iraq for the purpose of destroying Saddam Hussein's regime and transforming Iraq into a subordinate US ally, free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), is unlikely to make the Middle East any less volatile and American interests any more secure in the region in the long run. President George W. Bush has boxed himself into a corner over Saddam Hussein, and a US invasion of Iraq carries a very high risk of inflicting greater suffering upon the Iraqi people and subjecting the region to geostrategic shifts that may be beyond the US's power to control.

It is important to state at the outset that Saddam Hussein's leadership, ever since its formal inception in 1978, has proved to be both morally and politically indefensible. One cannot but be appalled by the nature of Hussein's dictatorship, his brutal suppression of dissent, his gassing of Iraq's Kurdish citizens, and his history of aggression against Iran and Kuwait, as well as his attempts to defy UN resolutions despite his humiliating defeat in the Gulf war seven years ago.

However, a US-led invasion of Iraq may prove to be equally indefensible. It is disturbing to note that the United States' policy behaviour towards Saddam Hussein has not been consistent and principled. In the 1980s, under a policy of 'constructive engagement' towards Iraq, the US showed no moral qualms about attempting to seduce and cultivate Saddam Hussein as a friend to counterbalance the anti-American, Islamic regime of Ayatullah Khomeini in Iran. The US assisted Hussein to fight with Iran the longest, bloodiest, and costliest war in the modern history of the Middle East—a war which lasted from 1982 to 1988 and cost more than one million lives, not to mention the incalculable material destruction and social dislocation that it caused for both sides. The current US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was one of the key American figures who played an important role in fostering closer relations between Washington and Baghdad. As President Ronald Reagan's representative, he visited Saddam Hussein in 1983 to convey the President's best wishes to the Iraqi leader and offer him American help. Washington's assistance ranged from providing Iraq with satellite photographs of Iran's military positions and operations, to tolerating the sale by various American companies of high-tech products which could be used for military purposes, to encouraging US allies to sell sophisticated weapon

systems to Iraq. Furthermore, the US supplied some 30 per cent of Iraq's agricultural needs, with virtually all the sales taking place 'under US government credit and subsidy programs that eventually totalled \$1 billion a year.'¹

Washington made no complaint about Iraq producing WMD or using them against Iran and Iraq's Kurdish population. In fact, according to former American ambassador to Iraq, Edward Peck, the US possibly even actively assisted Saddam Hussein's regime to acquire chemical and biological weapons.² As late as mid-April 1990, a US congressional delegation, headed by the senior Republican Senator Robert Dole, visited Baghdad to convey a special message from President George Bush to Saddam Hussein and to assure the latter of the United States' desire for continued warm relations.³

While maintaining a conspicuous silence over Saddam Hussein's brutalities, including his use of chemical weapons, Washington actively sought to help the Iraqi leader to achieve a level of political confidence and military capability that prepared him for further repressive and aggressive activities. It did so in the clear knowledge that the Iraqi dictator had harboured regional ambitions, with claims over even some of Iraq's Arab neighbours, most importantly Kuwait. In fact, he had invaded northern Kuwait in 1973, only to withdraw when he was threatened by the powerful Shah of Iran.⁴

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 outraged Washington, but probably not to the extent necessary to prompt it to aid the Iraqi people to determine the fate of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in the wake of Operation 'Desert Storm', which reversed the Iraqi invasion. President Bush personally called on the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam Hussein, but when they did and when they were confronted with the reality that the American defeat had not diminished his repressive capacity against the Iraqi people, Washington refrained from providing the help that the rebellious Iraqi Kurds and the Shi'ites (who incidentally constitute some 60 per cent of the Iraqi population) needed to resist the onslaught by Saddam Hussein's brutal Republican Guard.

What prevented Washington from acting decisively in this respect was not the fact that it did not have a clear UN mandate, for it was prepared in February 1998 to consider punishing Saddam Hussein without such a clear mandate and in the face of widespread opposition to the use of force by most of the regional states and members of the UN Security Council. It was actually a set of geostrategic considerations that constrained Washington from acting. These considerations ranged from the lack of a viable alternative to Saddam Hussein, to a fear that in the wake of the Iraqi leader's removal from power Iraq might disintegrate and Iran might emerge stronger, given Iraqi Shi'ites' sectarian affiliation with the Iranians.

Rather, Washington found Saddam Hussein useful as an enemy. It set out to exploit this enmity to change its pre-Kuwait invasion policy of 'constructive engagement' to a policy of 'divide and rule' in the region. It devised a strategy which had two mutually reinforcing aspects. One was to treat Iraq and Iran as the 'enemy' and to pronounce a policy of 'dual containment' towards them. Another was to set up a 'unipolar security system' in the Gulf, whereby the United States, as the sole superpower, would guarantee the security of its Gulf Arab friends—that is, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),⁵ led by Saudi Arabia—against these 'enemies' in exchange for their political, financial and infrastructural support. Washington wanted the system's immediate

objectives to be directed at keeping Iraq weak and out of the regional balance, with an expectation that this would make Saddam Hussein's regime collapse from within over whatever period of time might be necessary to find a viable alternative to it; at ensuring Iran's continued isolation for as long as it took its Islamic government to curb its independent religious posture and acquiesce to the dominance of the United States and its allies in the region; and at deterring and limiting all those regional forces and movements which were perceived as potentially threatening to US and allied interests.

For this, Washington urgently sought to construct a security system based on close bilateral and multilateral alliances with the GCC countries, pre-positioning as much weaponry as necessary in the allied countries, and stationing only a limited number of American troops in the region. This was to enable the United States to act as an 'above the horizon' actor, capable of dealing with problems whenever and wherever they arose, without stationing a large number of US troops in the area and therefore letting too many of them become the target of hostile actions.⁶

This meant that the new US approach to the security of the Gulf was now premised on maintaining Iraq and Iran as 'the enemy'. Without this, there would neither be a need for the kind of security system that it wanted to construct, nor could that security system function effectively. At the same time, America's allies would become dependent on the US and consequently vulnerable to its dictates. American policy makers, most importantly Martin Indyk (who had a substantial input into the formulation of the policy of 'dual containment') considered this security approach to be the most appropriate for maintaining America's influence in the region in the post-Cold War era.⁷

However, the whole approach soon faced serious difficulties and failed to produce the desired results. The 'dual containment' policy was successfully circumvented by both Iraq and Iran. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft and Richard Murphy, the first two former National Security Advisors to US Presidents, and the latter a former Assistant Secretary in the State Department, it was effective in isolating two states: Israel and the United States.⁸ Saddam Hussein managed to circumvent the UN sanctions in a way that badly impacted on the Iraqi people, with little or no effect on his ability to consolidate his hold on power, and survive as a thorn in the side of the United States. The Iranian leadership effectively used Iran's geopolitical assets to forge closer ties with Russia, China, India, and the European Union. As a result, every American effort at enforcing 'dual containment' ran into a dead end. President Clinton's decision in 1996 to tighten up the sanctions against Iran by ratifying an extra-territorial bill which subjected to American punishment those foreign companies which invested more than \$40 million in Iranian oil and gas industries, drew swift, widespread defiance from around the world. Taking the lead were US European allies, most importantly France and Germany, which flatly rejected the imposition of such extra-territorial American laws.

The unipolar security system did not effectively materialise either. Although Kuwait understandably signed a ten-year security pact with the United States in September 1991, Saudi Arabia and other GCC members did not find it domestically or regionally wise to provide the United States with the *carte blanche* that it needed to make the system fully operational. This became evident not only in their reluctance to conclude formal bilateral alliances with the US,

but also in their subsequent refusal to allow their territories to be used for military operations against Iraq. A number of considerations proved to be instrumental in this respect.

The GCC leaderships, with the exception of those of Kuwait and to some extent Bahrain (whose Shi'ite Muslims have a sectarian affiliation with Shi'ite Iran, and had increasingly grown restive towards their Sunni rulers), reasoned that following the damage done to Iraq as a result of the Gulf War and UN sanctions, Saddam Hussein no longer had the military and economic capacity to act as anything more than an irritant. As for his chemical and biological weapons, much of his stockpiles and long range delivery missiles were destroyed by United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), in charge of eliminating Iraq's WMD, before Saddam Hussein forced the Commission out of Iraq in late 1998 on the grounds that it had become a nest of American, British and Israeli spies and that it had no deadline to end UN sanctions against Iraq. Many in the Gulf had come to believe that under the prevailing constraints, Saddam Hussein would find it extremely difficult and costly if he tried to use such weapons against any of the GCC states, or for that matter any of America's other allies-most importantly Israel-in the region. According to this assessment, Saddam Hussein was aware that in the event of an Iraqi chemical or biological attack, the US and Israel's response could be nuclear-a fact which deterred Saddam Hussein from using any weapons of mass destruction during the Gulf War, and which would likely prevent him from doing so in the future, unless he finds himself cornered and decides to take Iraq and possibly the whole region down with him. Should Saddam Hussein take the latter course, most military analysts believed that there might be very little the United States could do to stop him, short of launching a massive pre-emptive strike-a development which could result in widespread civilian casualties and thus international condemnation of the US, as well as possible destabilisation of the region as a whole and the loss of America's grip on the area.

This situation has not changed to date, with one important exception: anti-American anger among Arab masses has escalated following the tragic events of 11 September 2001. This anger has been fuelled by the US failure to deal with the root causes of terrorism, of which Israel's repressive occupation of Palestinian land and continued defiance to comply with UN resolutions in support of the Palestinians' right to a homeland of their own is one. President Bush's strong support of Israel and his support of the right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as a 'man of peace', despite the fact that there is nothing in the 50 years of Sharon's public service to substantiate such a description, has led many in the Arab/Muslim world to become more frustrated with and scornful of the US than ever before. While most among the Arab peoples have little sympathy for Saddam Hussein, Israeli and American behaviour has prompted them to become tolerant of the Iraqi leader and defiant of Washington's call for support against him.

Should the US and a few of its allies, namely Britain and Australia, launch an attack on Iraq, without an explicit UN resolution authorising the use of force, one could expect a number of major complications.

The first is that because this time Saddam Hussein knows that the US is after him, he may, as a last resort, load some of his intermediate range missiles with chemical and biological weapons and target the oil fields of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in order to contaminate them and disallow the US and its allies to make use of them for many years to come. He may also set the Iraqi oil wells ablaze and destroy the country's oil platforms. His objective would be to cause a massive

rise in oil prices and an energy crisis larger than that of 1973-74, with serious repercussions for the world economy.

The second is that because the Iraqi opposition in exile-the Iraqi National Congress-is still as factionalised and riddled with internal personal and group animosities as it was a decade ago, the US is unlikely to come up with a viable alternative to Saddam Hussein's regime. The main factor that has led the opposition groups to make a show of public unity in recent months is Washington's pressure and promise of securing power for them. In the event of Saddam Hussein's fall, there will be little to keep these groups together. The Iraqi opposition is very different from the Afghan anti-Taliban alliance, led by the dominant Tajik group of Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, who was assassinated two days before 11 September 2001. The Massoud group proved instrumental in keeping the alliance together, providing the US and its allies with an effective bridgehead and assisting them in the ground war, and leading the alliance to negotiate for an alternative to the Taliban government. The Iraqi opposition lacks such a dominant force and a ground fighting capacity inside Iraq.

This is the main reason why, by early October 2002, the Bush Administration toned down its earlier rhetoric in support of elements of the Iraqi opposition and began working hard on a contingency plan to replace Saddam Hussein's regime, should it become necessary, with a US-run occupation administration, modelled on the one that ran Japan after World War II. However, the problem that such an administration would face is that, unlike Japan, Iraq is not an island state. It shares long borders and extensive cross-border ties with its neighbours. It will be difficult for the US to control these borders and prevent the Iranians, Turks and Arabs for too long to engage in activities in Iraq in pursuit of conflicting regional interests. This means that the US and its allies will have to remain militarily engaged in Iraq on a long-term basis, which could prove to be more costly than can be anticipated at this point. It could prompt the US to divert resources away from Afghanistan, with a profound effect on the 'war against terror'. Meanwhile, the US promise that it would institute a viable democratic system of governance in Iraq is somewhat hollow. Washington has already declared its determination not to let the Iraqi Shi'ite majority lead the country because it might benefit Iran and the Iraqi Kurds to achieve confederated autonomy that could lead to the break up of Iraq.

The third complication concerns the fact that a US military campaign and Iraq's response this time is bound to be very different from that of 1991. Since the US objective is now regime change and direct destruction of Iraq's WMD, this objective cannot be secured by air bombardment and special force operations alone, as was done in Afghanistan. The US forces will have to go inside Iraq in large numbers and be prepared to fight Saddam Hussein's troops in what might turn out to be very intense and bloody urban warfare. As such, the war may not be as short and swift as many American policy makers and strategists may have hoped. It could carry the risk of high casualties on both sides, and the images of too many Iraqi civilians being killed and injured could only add to popular grievances over Israel's repression of the Palestinians and America's strategic partnership with the Jewish state across the Arab/Muslim world. They could galvanise the Arab masses to the point of explosion not just against the US and its allies, but against some pro-US authoritarian Arab regimes which have not been able either to contain the plight of the Palestinian people or to deter the US and its allies from inflicting another round of suffering on the Iraqi people.

The war itself may remain confined very much to Iraq and possibly the oil fields of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Saddam Hussein lacks the necessary means of delivery to hit Israel, the Arab regimes are devoid of the needed will and strength to defy the US in support of Iraq, and the Iranian regime, which resents any increase in US presence in the region, is bound to be careful, as it was in the Gulf War of 1991, not to provide any pretext for the US to attack Iran. However, this is not to claim that US interests will not be targeted in the Arab world and beyond. All regimes in the region and further afield in the Muslim domain have certainly sought to suppress radical Islamist opposition in one form or another, with the exception of that of Iran where the Islamists, though divided among themselves, are in power. Yet they have succeeded in diminishing the appeal of either radical Islamism as an ideology of popular mobilisation and resistance or Osama Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network as the recent embodiment of such an ideology. However, one cannot rule out the existence in concealment of many actual Al Qaeda supporters and non-Al Qaeda potential radical Islamists in the region. A protracted American military involvement in Iraq, without a resolution of the Palestinian problem, could easily play into the hands of such elements. If they do not react immediately, they will have enough cause to swell their ranks and engage in hostile activities in the medium to long run. By the same token, the regimes, especially in some of the Arab countries, may not be able to contain the emotions of ordinary citizens from boiling over, with dire consequences for some of them.

Two countries which may need to be watched closely are Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Saudi theocratic regime is in a very precarious situation. On the one hand, it is in deep domestic trouble for its mismanagement of the Saudi oil wealth and for failing to build a polity where political inclusiveness, rule of law, separation of powers, independent judiciary and observance of human rights underpin the operation of state and society. This has enabled both radical religious and democratic opposition to gain ground among the Saudis, although largely as an underground phenomenon. On the other hand, it has come under increasing criticism from its main long-standing patron ally, the United States, since the 11 September events. The neoconservative, pro-Israeli elements in the Bush Administration have accused the Saudi regime of having nurtured a kind of Islam and supported a kind of Islamic education at home and abroad which have helped to spawn radical Islamism as a force against the US and Israel. A combination of potential domestic instability and exogenous pressure has left the Ibn Saud rule in a state of limbo and in a weaker position than at any time since the inception of the American-Saudi special relationship some 60 years ago. While in the short run it may be able to withstand the consequences of a US war with Iraq, if it fails to go with the flow of Arab public feelings it can expect very turbulent times ahead—something which could have serious long-term repercussions for regional stability, and the international oil market and economy.

The same goes for Egypt, where Husni Mubarak's veiled authoritarian regime has increasingly been viewed both at home and in the Arab world as under the sway of Washington. The regime faces strong internal opposition from the ranks of growing Islamist and secularist reformists, not to mention Islamic extremists, whom it has been able to suppress but not eliminate. This, together with the fact that the regime has been able neither to improve substantially the living conditions of the poor Egyptian masses, nor to reduce the rampant social and economic inequalities, nor to play a productive role in influencing Washington and Jerusalem (with which it has a peace treaty) to resolve the Palestinian problem, has left the regime in a state of serious potential instability. An American war with Iraq could easily expose the regime to greater

domestic and foreign policy problems. Egypt is a key Arab state, with the largest population. If it is destabilised, it would have a rippling effect on the rest of the Arab world.

The biggest danger that a war with Iraq poses is the further antagonism of moderate Islamists, who form the bulk of Islamists in the Muslim world. They are the ones who believe in Islam as a peaceful ideology of transformation of their societies, but have no aversion to co-existing with the West (or more specifically the United States) interactively and cooperatively in a globalised world. They can be a significant element in terms of creating bridges of understanding and cooperation which are now required between the world of Islam and the West, especially in the negative environment which has emerged since the 11 September events and America's response to those events. Moderate Islamists are already disturbed over the neoconservative hawks who have come to dominate the Bush Administration, with a goal to remake not only the Middle East but also Islam in accordance with US globalist interests. If a war with Iraq provides more tangible evidence about this wider agenda, it is bound to weaken further the position of moderate Islamists in favour of those in the Muslim world who argue for more Islamic militancy as an effective means to defend themselves and their Islamic way of life.

The question that haunts many in the region and beyond is this: how is it, as Washington has repeatedly claimed, that the American policy of containment and deterrence, which formed the basis of American foreign policy behaviour for 50 years, worked against a superpower like the Soviet Union, but cannot achieve a similar result against a small actor like Saddam Hussein's regime? It is this question that has led many in the Muslim world to suspect that the US has a wider agenda behind a war with Iraq. Some have reason to think that since American neoconservatives never accepted America's 'loss' of the oil-rich and strategically vital Iran as a result of the Iranian revolution of 1978-79, the Bush Administration's wider target is Iran. An American occupation of Iraq, together with its military presence in Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Gulf and Turkey, would provide it with a full encirclement of Iran, and therefore the necessary leverage to cause a shift in the balance of power away from Iranian Islamic hardliners to those Islamists and hidden secularists who want to renew ties with the United States.

A change of this kind would leave the US in an unassailable position to bring favourable political shifts in the rest of the region, although such shifts in the past have proved quite counter-productive. One such shift was when the CIA reinstated in 1953 the Shah on his throne to rule Iran at the behest of the US. But this eventually contributed substantially to the popular revolution which brought the Shah down 25 years later and caused the US to suffer a major strategic setback in the Middle East. There is every chance that the US could face a similar backlash in Iraq. Saddam Hussein is condemnable in many ways and there is a need for structural changes and democratisation in the Arab world, but the way the Bush Administration wants to tackle the problems could prove to be very costly for all involved. It could plunge the region into deeper volatility and instability.

NOTES

¹ Barry Rubin, 'The United States and Iraq: From appeasement to war', in Amatzia Baram and Barry Rubin (eds), *Iraq's road to war* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 255. Even in the late 1990s, when the current US Vice-President Dick Cheney was running Halliburton (the oil services firm), Halliburton 'sold more equipment to Iraq than any other company did.' For details, see Nicholas D. Kristof, 'Cheney didn't mind Saddam', *International Herald Tribune*, 16 October 2002.

² 7.30 Report, ABC Television, 30 September 2002.

³ For the text of conversation between the members of the delegation and President Saddam Hussein, see Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf (eds), *The Gulf War reader: History, documents, opinion* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 119-21.

⁴ For an account of the incident, see Amin Saikal, *The rise and fall of the Shah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 238, fn. 13.

⁵ The Gulf Cooperation Council is composed of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain.

⁶ For details, see Amin Saikal, 'The United States and Persian Gulf security', *World Policy Journal*, 9(3) Summer 1992, pp. 515-31.

⁷ See Martin Indyk (President Clinton's policy advisor on the Middle East), 'The Clinton administration's approach to the Middle East', statement delivered to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 18 May 1993.

⁸ For details, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft and Richard Murphy, 'Differentiated containment', *Foreign Affairs*, 76(3) May-June 1997, pp. 20-30.