

## Modern Iraq - Background

By all accounts, post-World War II U.S. involvement in Middle Eastern affairs has been a complicated combination of Cold War objectives, covert provisions, political mazes, and economic interests. The current U.S. showdown with Iraq is certainly no exception. This concert of sometimes-contradictory U.S. actions has led, not least, to fundamentalist-fueled Arab aversion to American foreign policy. In the case of Saddam Hussein and Iraq, such distaste for the U.S. can perhaps be best understood through a brief Iraqi political history, an account that reveals the ebb and flow of American political sympathies in this complex geopolitical region.

Though unanimously viewed as a tight-fisted dictator over his people, Hussein must be understood first and foremost for what he is: a product of political, cultural, and military forces within recent Iraqi history. Not least among these forces is Saddam's connection to the **Ba'ath party**. Current Ba'athist policies have been shaped by two significant events in Iraq's history: the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980's, and the invasion of Kuwait in 1991. These events can only be understood, however, in the broader context of 20th century politics in Iraq.

### 1. 20th Century Iraq and the Rise of Saddam Hussein:

During World War I, the British wrested control of nearly all Iraqi provinces (*wilayat*) from the Turks, who had been assisting Germany during the war. At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Iraq was formally declared a Class A mandate and was entrusted to Britain. Iraqi discontent grew, as nationalist-inspired movements for independence spread through clans and villages. The great 1920 Iraqi Revolution marked a new phase in the drive for Iraqi self-determination, an independence sought fervently by the Iraqi people. A new, Arab-dominated government was established in 1922, but a real British influence persisted in Iraqi affairs. The most pressing issue confronting the new constitutional monarchy was the demarcation of state boundaries. The **Kurdish-dominated Mosul Province** in the North, which held petroleum interests for the British, also sought independence from both Turkey and Iraq. After signing a series of oil deposit treaties — each of which was summarily scrapped in turn — the League of Nations finally came to an agreement on the matter, declaring Mosul part of Iraq in 1926. Complete independence for Iraq came in October 1932 when a newly elected Labour Party government in Britain supported Iraq's admission to the League of Nations as an independent state.

Following independence, the new Iraqi state was beset by intense border conflicts, clashes which came as a direct result of old British boundary demarcations. Mosul in the North, Basra in the South, and uncertainty surrounding Iraq's new borders with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia became issues of intense political, economic, and social significance. These issues, along with religious and ideological conflict, continued to plague the ruling **Hashemite monarchy** for the next two decades, until the monarchy was ousted and replaced by a group known as the Free Officers in July, 1958. This coup was led by Abd-al-Karim Qasim, and represented the culmination of several failed attempts over the previous twenty-five years. More pro-Western than their traditionalist compatriots, the Hashemites were viewed by many Iraqi intellectuals as the root of Iraq's problems — problems they attributed to a domineering Western influence. Unable to resolve Iraq's many internal problems, Qasim ultimately failed both as leader and statesman. In February 1963, the Ba'athist party, founded in the early 1940's by two Syrian students, overthrew Qasim.

This control, however, lasted less than a year. Although the Ba'ath party was strongly supported by a dissatisfied citizenry when Qasim was in power, this support quickly eroded. Ironically, the very same policies that helped the party gain broad-based support during Qasim's reign proved to be its downfall. The party lacked direction, and this uncertainty affected both the Ba'ath party's larger popularity and its internal cohesion. This erosion of public support, coupled with the Egyptian President Nasser's opposition to the party, led to a bloodless coup in November of 1963. **Arif**, the leader of the new government, immediately announced a military dictatorship, one that would ultimately be destroyed by its own inactions. After five years, the Arif government was little more than a collection of military officers, with significant levels of internal strife. Once again, the Ba'ath party took advantage of the fragile political situation, capitalizing on a coup initiated by two of Arif's officers. In late 1968, the Ba'ath party took power once again.

Given a second chance, the party was rejuvenated, demonstrating a clear determination to remain in power. In the period between 1968 and 1973, **Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr** (then president of the party) and **Saddam Hussein** purged the government of dissenters through executions, assassinations, and intimidation. Although Bakr was Hussein's senior and held higher levels of prestige, by 1969 Saddam Hussein had clearly become the

moving force behind the party. He personally directed Ba'athist attempts to settle the Kurdish question, and organized the party's internal structure. Over the next four years, the party attempted to institutionalize its rule, but such a consolidation of power would prove elusive. Real power remained linked to familial clan bonds, with the most powerful members of the government claiming blood ties to Hussein and Bakr. Beginning in the mid-1970's, Bakr was plagued by both illness and a series of family tragedies. He increasingly delegated power to Hussein. By 1977, party bureaucrats, intelligence mechanisms, and even ministers who, according to the Provisional Constitution, were to report to Bakr, reported to Hussein. Hussein, meanwhile, was less willing to share power. On July 16, 1979, President Bakr resigned, and Saddam Hussein officially replaced him as President of the Republic, Secretary General of the Ba'ath Party Regional Command, Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, and Commander in Chief of the armed forces.

## 2. The Iran-Iraq War:

Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Fundamentalist Movement (IFM) took power in 1979 after a long period of political unrest and rebellion. In 1980, the new Iranian government increased its rhetoric against other Arab states. The criticism of Iraq was especially strong, since Iran thought Hussein was too closely linked with the West. This rhetoric sprung directly from IFM ideology, and it frightened both Iraq (which feared revolt) and the U.S. (which feared regional destabilization and threats to its presence in the Gulf). Saddam Hussein acted first, launching a combined ground and air strike against Iran. In part, Iraq's aggression also grew out of a desire for control of an oil-rich Iranian border territory and control of both sides of the **Shatt al-Arab**, a river in Southeast Iraq. Fearing the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, which by this time had become a major influence in Iranian society, the U.S. decided to aid Iraq in its war against Iran. The Reagan Administration viewed Iraq as a buffer region, the defense of which secured both the containment of Islamic fundamentalist ideology and, more importantly, access to the vast oil reserves in the Arabian Peninsula. While remaining politically neutral in public, the administration privately supported the Iraqis, providing Baghdad with strategic intelligence. But the same anti-Western sentiment that the administration defended against in its decision to aid Hussein had also been brewing in Iraq since at least the early sixties.

In the end, the choice between supporting Iran and supporting Iraq was a choice between the lesser of two evils. Military-oriented, pan-Arab Islamic fundamentalism was thought to be much more dangerous than the Ba'athist regime. While the former dealt in the currency of radical, absolutist ideology, the latter was framed upon a more open, modern, and understandable structure of political interest. The Ba'athists were a political party that could be examined as an organization. The structure of this organization was known, and its workings could (theoretically, at least) be understood. Extremist ideology, particularly one that subscribed to fundamentalist dogma, was not as predictable, not so easily understood. The decision to side with Iraq thus struck U.S. leaders as the best alternative among an unattractive list of options.

The war itself was a classic case of peace by attrition. After marginal gains in the early 80s, Iraq lost ground and announced that it was ready to negotiate peace. Iran refused to bargain. Stalemated fighting continued until 1988, when both countries agreed to a cease-fire.

## 3. The Invasion of Kuwait and Internal Iraqi Dissent:

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was the next major event that necessitated U.S. engagement with Iraq. By this time, the war with Iran had become a war of attrition, with minor, sporadic skirmishes fought over small areas of borderland. Still feeling the economic effects of the war with Iran, Iraq invaded Kuwait. In response to this new round of Iraqi aggression, a U.S.-led UN coalition drove the Iraqis from Kuwait, stopping short of Baghdad. The Bush Administration wanted a regime change but insisted that any insurgency come from within Iraq. Such a plan, however, was not part of the original UN mandate. Nevertheless, the administration fomented unrest by encouraging already-dissenting Kurds and Iraqis to revolt. Soon after, however, the U.S. withdrew assistance to the resistance, fearing regional destabilization. This "about-face" by the Bush administration severely damaged the Iraqi resistance's confidence in U.S. support.

After the post-war establishment of the Northern Safe Haven, a joint U.S.-British protected zone that secured the safety of Kurdish refugees and Iraqi dissenters, the **Iraqi National Congress (INC)** was formed. Represented by various anti-Hussein resistance factions, the INC began to gather support for an insurgency whose goal would be the overthrow of Hussein and the Ba'athist regime. In 1995, with support from the Clinton Administration and the CIA, the INC mobilized its army, marching southward into Iraq. Thousands of Hussein's soldiers defected without fighting, and the Northern Safe Haven became home to more and more Iraqis willing

to depose their leader. At the precise moment of the INC's successes, however, the U.S. again withdrew its support. While the U.S. supported the INC Army's initial incursions, it was not prepared for the insurgents' dramatic successes. The U.S. viewed the INC primarily as a political tool that would weaken and distract the regime, not as a main player in the regime's overthrow. Again, the U.S. withdrew support from the Iraqi resistance, deciding not to overplay its hand in the region. This reversal led to increased dissatisfaction with America among resistance forces. Subsequent attempts by the Clinton administration to respond to criticism on the matter were ineffective.

Due to these fluctuations in American support for Iraqi and Kurdish opposition groups, U.S. support in the region quickly declined. Understandably, anti-Hussein resistance factions saw U.S. support as unsteady and unreliable, at best. Hussein's Ba'athist propaganda machine took this opportunity to ratchet up its anti-American rhetoric, painting the U.S. as an oppressive, pro-Israeli, anti-Islamic foe, bent on the genocide of Arab Muslims. The four years since UNSCOM weapons inspectors were forced to leave Iraq have only furthered Hussein's ability to perpetrate such propaganda among its impoverished, disillusioned people.

Given this history, an analysis of what ought to be done regarding the current situation becomes much more complicated. The events of the past year, along with the threat of Hussein's possible nuclear, biological, and chemical capabilities, must be seen in the context of Iraq's history and America's involvement in that history, rather than as a series of events divorced from the pre-Gulf War era. Hussein's role as the head Ba'athist may at first seem incidental. How many dictators, after all, are noted *primarily* for their ties to a particular political party? In this case, though, an understanding of Iraqi political history may very well help to suggest a way forward in a post-Hussein Iraq. For those who do not know history — party heads and dictators alike — are doomed to repeat it.