

IRAQ AND ITS ENVIRONMENT BEFORE MARCH 2003

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Writing with the advantage of hindsight, the situation inside Iraq and that in its immediate environment in early 2003 seems clear. Iraq itself had been profoundly weakened by more than a decade of sanctions and its weapons-of-mass-destruction programmes had been shattered. Yet, at the same time, it was still profoundly distrusted and feared by most of its neighbours, including Iran and Kuwait, both of whom had been victims of its violence in the preceding two decades. It is against this background, after all, that most contemporary evaluations of the American-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 are made.

However, at the time, matters were nowhere near so clear and the key policy decisions that led to the invasion of Iraq were made against the background of far less definite knowledge than is available to us today. This is not to deny that the intentions that drove such decisions had not been predetermined by many other factors. It simply suggests that the evidence adduced to justify them was fallible and often insubstantial, so that decisions were often made on the basis of perceptions, themselves already warped by previous prejudice, than informed by an objective evaluation of the reality at the time.

A consideration that is equally important is that such evidence was also often misused to justify those perceptions and thus the project behind the invasion. This was the ambition of creating a democratic Iraq as a guarantor of Western interests and regional stability, as well as becoming a driver for political change throughout the region. And that, in turn, was an expression of a dominant belief in the legitimacy of pre-emptive intervention, with Iraq which had dared to challenge Western objectives in the past as its first experiment.

It is worth considering why this was so, for often the problem was not a lack of knowledge so much as a wilful refusal to interpret what knowledge there was objectively. And this, in turn, occurred both because of Western ignorance and because of Anglo-Saxon prejudice. One of the consequences of the United Nations sanctions regime imposed after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and its subsequent expulsion, as a result of the actions of the American-led Multinational Coalition in February 1991, was that those powers which had participated had subsequently lost all diplomatic access to Baghdad – the main means by which, traditionally, states acquired familiarity with the policies and objectives of their diplomatic adversaries and allies.

Of course, by 2003, most European states had restored some diplomatic presence, chief amongst them France, and even Arab Gulf states had begun to return, led by Qatar. Britain and the United States, however, had no diplomatic eyes there and had to rely, in consequence, on intelligence-led information which was to prove to be misleading and woefully inadequate, as well as, on occasion, being tailored to fit government prejudice. Nor did they even have informal contacts with the Iraqi regime led by Saddam Hussain, since all such approaches it made to them were rebuffed. Britain and the United States demanded that Iraq should first publicly accept the United Nations-decreed sanctions regime in full before any such discussion could begin. Yet, of course, that was the one concession the regime could not make, given the importance it attached to its own territorial integrity as an expression of sovereignty.

The situation inside Iraq

The physical situation inside Iraq was indeed well-known at the time, a consequence of the United Nations sanctions regime and the obduracy of the Iraqi government. Per capita GDP had dropped from around \$3,700 in 1988, before the invasion of Kuwait and at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, to an estimated \$180 in 1994, although the United Nations oil-for-food programme, instituted in 1995, raised it to \$770 by 2002. Infant mortality rates had risen from an average of 30 per 1,000 between 1984 and 1989 to 101 a decade later and under-five mortality rates had shown a similar trend, rising from an average of 50 between 1984 and 1989 to 122 a decade later.

Inflation was high and it was estimated that living standards had declined by almost 70 per cent overall. However, the elite had managed to avoid most of the consequences of sanctions and the growth of state-sanctioned smuggling, designed to evade the United Nations sanctions regime, had created a new elite that was very visible in major cities despite the widespread squalor and poverty. Repression was intense and the government's policies of co-opting social groups and movements, both tribal and religious, as a means of increasing its control and also led to a criminalisation of repression. Only the Kurdish areas avoided this, as they were virtually autonomous and protected by the no-fly zone in the North, but there power was effectively divided between the two major Kurdish parties who jealously guarded their privileges.

On paper, too, the Iraqi army appeared to be a major military force. However, the conscript popular army, a million strong, was in reality poorly equipped with obsolescent weaponry and profoundly demoralised. Real power lay with the Special Republican Guard divisions, recruited from the Sunni heartlands of Northern and Western Iraq. Yet their real purpose was to guarantee the regime as much as to defend the state and, despite their

superior armament, they represented much less of a threat to surrounding states. Beyond that, Iraq's air-force was no longer a credible threat; its advanced fighter and bombers were interned in Iran, held against payment of war reparations, and the sanctions regime forbade it to fly any aircraft except helicopters.

The weapons-of-mass-destruction programmes lay in ruins, after the activities of UNSCOM up to 1994 and the consequences of the revelations made by Hussain Kamal al-Majid, the minister of heavy industry and Saddam Hussain's cousin, after he fled to Jordan in 1995. In effect, Iraq no longer had any significant weapons programmes but the regime concealed this behind a cloak of ambiguity, apparently because it believed that this was the only way to deter Iran from attacking it. What this, however, did was to create sufficient doubt to justify subsequent Western accusations that it was concealing such programmes, despite the warnings of Hans Blix, the head of UNMOVIC, which had replaced UNSCOM in 2000 after a spying scandal had enabled Iraq to refuse to cooperate with the latter body any more.

This was not its only fundamental error in diplomacy. The other crucial misapprehension was a firm belief, going back to the Iran-Iraq War that, given the dramatic rupture in American foreign policy in the Gulf caused by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Iraq was now America's essential security partner in the region. The problem was that Washington had not yet appreciated this reality. Bizarre though it may seem, given the events of the 1990s, this view persisted in leadership circles in Baghdad to such an extent that a doctoral thesis, purporting to have been authored by Uday, the Iraqi dictator's elder son, appeared as a book in 2000, providing written proof that self-inflicted delusions also affected Iraq policy-makers.

The geopolitical environment

This might perhaps help to explain why Baghdad spent relatively little time in trying to placate or suborn surrounding states into opposing Western policy. With the Arab states of the Gulf, that was hardly surprising; most had been severely bruised in 1990 and their governments had accepted the need for external participation in regional security, even if their populations were increasingly disquieted by what they saw as the double standards implicit in Western policy. For them, the Clinton administration's policy of "dual containment" of both Iraq and Iran, backed up by the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and prepositioning of military stores for French, British and American forces, together with a permanent American garrison in Saudi Arabia was fine. The Levantine states were more equivocal whilst Israel, despite a dalliance with the possibility of new alignments in 1988, was openly hostile. Yet Iraq's neglect of Iran and Turkey was more surprising, particularly as both states had a direct purchase on its future.

The Gulf

Kuwait, as the direct target of Iraq's 1990 invasion, was in no mood to humour Baghdad. It still demanded substantial compensation for that experience and received a significant portion of the 30 per cent levy on Iraq's oil income under the oil-for-food programme for that purpose. Its sovereign status and its northern border had been established after the invasion by the United Nations – to Iraq's great disadvantage since it no longer controlled access to its second port, Umm Qasr. Kuwait, in short, sought isolation from Iraq and the return of its remaining nationals allegedly held in Iraqi prisons. Conversely, it was more than happy to welcome the new American-led invasion force, spread over half its territory which it was to use as a jumping-off point for the March invasion of Iraq.

Saudi Arabia, at one level, had a position as intransigent as that of Kuwait. It regarded the Saddam Hussain regime as a potential hegemonic regional rival unless it was constantly restrained, as the sanctions regime had done. However, the Kingdom was also aware of the damage done to its prestige by the remaining American military force on its territory, alongside America's unbalanced policies in the region, with which the Saudi government was increasingly associated in the eyes of the Arab street. It had faced domestic unrest in consequence of its over-close association with American policy objectives in the Middle East and was further alienated from the United States by the gusts of condemnation from the Beltway institutes and political circles over its nationals' involvement in the events of September 11, 2001.

Its position over the proposed invasion was more nuanced; it recognised the utility of such an initiative in that it would remove a regional rival but did not wish to be associated too closely with it. It had thus refused to allow the basing of the invasion force on its territory, although it was prepared to allow its airports to be used for the bombing campaign against Iraq. Nor was it accident, furthermore, that shortly before the invasion began, the American command structure in the Gulf moved lock, stock and barrel to Qatar.

The other Gulf states within the Gulf Cooperation Council – by now a vehicle for economic integration under Saudi aegis rather than the regional security organisation it had originally been conceived to be in 1980 – were more muted and more ambiguous over their positions towards Iraq, largely because of the social situation there. Thus Qatar had already returned its ambassador to Baghdad whilst Shaykh Zaid, president of the United Arab Emirates, had made his concerns about the effect of sanctions on the Iraqi population very clear. However, neither of the states, nor Bahrain, was prepared to break ranks with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The Levant

In the Levant, there were similar ambiguities. Ba'athist Syria, for example, had been long estranged from the Ba'athist regime in Iraq and, in fact, had been demonised by the Saddam Hussain regime long before its engagement with the Multinational Coalition which had forced Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991. Yet, in 1997, some years before the invasion of Iraq actually occurred in 2003, the two countries began a cautious rapprochement. This had resulted in the renewal of economic links which rapidly grew and, in 2001, the two countries signed a free trade agreement. By the time of the invasion, although Syria endorsed United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441 which reinstated weapons inspection, it refused to endorse or participate in the invasion itself.

Jordan's relations with Iraq were even more ambiguous. During the Iran-Iraq War, Jordan had been a strong backer of the Saddam Hussain regime, mainly because of its anxieties over the hegemonic ambitions of the new Islamic Republic in Iran. Jordan had also been a lifeline for Iraq during the war, given the access it provided to the Red Sea through its port of Aqaba and had received guaranteed oil supplies from Iraq at reduced rates in return.

It had tried unsuccessfully to mediate between Iraq and the Arab world over a non-violent solution to the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990, thereby earning the enmity of both moderate Arab states and the West. It was really only in 1995 that the Jordanian government began to openly criticise its Iraqi counterpart, even though it had maintained the United Nations sanctions regime. Amman was also home to an ever-increasing Iraqi community engaged in licit and illicit trade with Iraq. Nor surprisingly, it did not participate in the 2003 invasion although, by then, the new king was to offer cautious encouragement.

Hegemonic alternatives

One of the drivers for the Saddam Hussain's persistent challenge to Western powers had to do with its perception of itself as a regional hegemon, a perception that powerfully affected its relations with its two most important neighbours, Turkey and Iran.

Turkey

Turkey, in particular, had been one of Iraq's major trading partners during the Iran-Iraq War – and had held a similar position with Iran. It continued to be a major economic partner after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and greatly resented the consequences of the sanctions regime, not least the loss of oil flows through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline. Southern Anatolia also

developed a major oil smuggling operation with Iraq through the autonomous Kurdish area which had to be reluctantly condoned by Western powers and which benefited both Turkey and Kurdistan since the Kurdish authorities could levy duties on the oil exports through Zählé.

The reason for this diplomatic indulgence was, quite simply, that the Anglo-Franco-American air operation designed to preserve the northern no-fly zone in Iraq depended on NATO access to the Turkish airbase at Inçurlik and this gift depended on regular renewal of the access agreements by the Turkish parliament and, behind it, the Turkish government and the Army general staff. In 2002, Turkey underwent a political transformation with the election of a government led by an Islamist-dominated coalition under the AKP. On this occasion, the Army staff, which had forced out the earlier Refah Islamist government, did not intervene. The consequence was that Turkish public opinion became ever more hostile to American policy in Iraq and, when the United States sought Turkey's agreement to launch an offensive from Turkey on Northern Iraq in March 2003, it was refused.

Iran

The situation in Iran was even more confusing. Iran always considered itself to be the victim of Iraqi aggression in the Iran-Iraq War and bitterly resented the fact that it had had to accept the ceasefire in 1988. Nevertheless, the Iraq defeat and the subsequent United Nations sanctions regime against it had assuaged its feelings to some degree and, by the end of the 1990s, the two countries had resumed formal diplomatic relations. Beyond that, the Iranian private sector was heavily engaged in subverting the oil sanctions against Iraq and confidence had been restored to such an extent that there were weekly organised trips of hundreds of Iranians to visit the major Shi'a shrines in Iraq at Qadhamayn in Baghdad, Samarra, Najaf and Karbala.

Nevertheless, for Iranian leaders the Saddam Hussain regime still represented their major potential security threat - after the United States - and Iran's claims for reparations for the Iran-Iraq War had not been forgotten. There was, therefore, no Iranian objection at all to the idea that the regime in Baghdad should be toppled, not least because it would remove a hegemonic challenge to Iran itself in the Gulf, Levant and Central Asian regions. The problem was that it would be the United States that would be the agent for such a change. That was far more difficult for Iranian leaders to accept, given American hostility since 1979 to the Islamic Republic. Indeed, by 2003, Iran was labouring under unilateral American sanctions created by the policy of dual containment and the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, passed by Congress in August 1996 and renewed in 2001.

Their reluctance to accept an American intervention was linked to their perceptions of American strategy in the region, for they seem to have been convinced that regime change in Iraq would be followed by regime change in Iran. These sentiments had been engendered by the American intervention in Afghanistan one-and-a-half years earlier, in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. This had not only introduced American forces along Iran's eastern borders, it had also created an American presence, as part of the supply chain for the Afghani operations, in Central Asia to Iran's north. The United States was already present in the Gulf, in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and, with American occupation of Iraq, Iran would be surrounded.

Yet, at the beginning of the new century, just three years before, Iran appeared to have achieved hegemony in the Gulf and in regions to the north and east. Set in this context, Iranian paranoia over the coming occupation of Iran is readily understandable, as was the Iranian leadership's subsequent offer to the United States to discuss all outstanding matters between the two countries, an offer which the Bush administration contemptuously ignored. Without insight and expertise, it would have been difficult for politicians to have imagined then the transformation of Iran's position into its contemporary status as the dominant regional power in the Gulf and the constant preoccupation of Western concerns there!

Conclusion

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, at the start of 2003, Iraq was an impotent state in regional terms, confined and tamed by the sanctions regime whatever the ambitions of its rulers may have been. It also seems clear that surrounding states except, perhaps, for Kuwait – and for very understandable reasons – were well aware of this. Their governments may well have disliked the Saddam Hussain regime and been prepared to see it go but they were restrained for three reasons.

Firstly, the idea of direct Western intervention was worrisome, despite (or perhaps because of) the experiences of 1990. Secondly, the overt American agenda of pre-emptive intervention to enforce democratisation was a direct threat to their own interests, particularly if Iraq were to re-emerge as a powerful regional state to challenge them. Third, their public opinions were intensely hostile to such an initiative which, they realised, would be bound to inflame extremist sentiment. Such concerns explain the ambiguities with which the American-led Western initiative was viewed in the Gulf and the Levant and even in Egypt. In the event, their anxieties have been justified, even if the reasons for this have turned out to be very different from their expectations in 2003!