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From Sumer to Saddam

For many long years, Iraq and the United States had little to do with each other. The days of Iraq's greatest glory occurred long before there ever was a United States, and in recent centuries, while America was still a young and relatively isolated nation, the Iraqis were ruled by the Ottoman Turks, whose relationship with the United States barely existed. Even after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and the formation of the modern state of Iraq, it was Britain, not America, that dominated Iraqi politics for decades. Indeed, as for many Arabs, until only the last few decades, the United States was little more than a strange name of a distant land for most Iraqis. Before the Second World War, the United States had only commercial relationships in the Persian Gulf, and it carefully avoided any involvement in the region's politics. In the decades after the war, Washington did take an increasing interest in the Gulf but mostly focused its attentions on Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iraq was a weak radical Arab state with ties to Russia but did not pose enough of a threat to take seriously. It was not until the 1980s that the two countries came into meaningful contact, and then the limits of their prior relations bred ignorance, miscalculation, and suspicion, leading to regular misreadings of each other's intentions.

THE SHADOW OF IRAQ'S PAST

In the popular imagination, Iraq is a vast desert, interrupted by occasional oases and cut by the two great rivers of ancient Mesopotamia, the Tigris and Euphrates. While much of Iraq is desert, especially in the south and west, the Kurdish north is heavily mountainous and great swathes of the country are fertile farmland. Indeed, in ancient times, Iraq was one of the lushest regions on earth. The biblical Garden of Eden was set in Iraqi Mesopotamia. More than 5,000 years ago, that verdant soil produced the world's earliest known civilization, that of Sumer in southern Mesopotamia, which developed writing, divisions of labor, complex social hierarchies, and an elaborate political and religious system. Out of ancient Sumer came Abraham, the father of Jews and Arabs, the founder of Judaism, the first monotheist. The Sumerians were also the first pyramid builders, although their massive ziggurats were great temples like those of the Mayans and Aztecs, rather than tombs like the Egyptians'. Sargon I of Akkad conquered Sumer and spread its culture to the Mediterranean by adding northern Mesopotamia, Syria, and southern Turkey to his demesne. After the Sumerians, two of the ancient world's great empires ruled the lands that would become Iraq. First Babylon, whose Hanging Gardens were a wonder of the ancient world and whose people bequeathed us the Code of Hammurabi, perhaps the world's first written legal system and the origin of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." After that came Assyria, whose fearsome armies are credited with the first systematic application of the science of military logistics. Later Assyrian and Babylonian kings ruled all of modern Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel. Indeed, it was the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II who sacked Jerusalem and took the Jews into captivity in Babylon.

For more than a millennium after the fall of Babylon and Assyria, the lands of Iraq would be ruled by empires out of what would become Iran. First the Medes, then the Persians, and finally the Parthians would rule Mesopotamia, both north and south. Throughout that time, Babylon remained an important center of culture and political administration. Alexander passed through on his campaigns, fighting a mighty battle at Arbela (present day Arbil in northern Iraq). However, it was not until the Islamic conquest of the seventh century A.D. that Iraq again resumed prominence. Mesopotamia was among the first of the conquests of the caliphs who succeeded the prophet Muhammad, and it enjoyed temporary glory again

when 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph and the husband of Muhammad's beloved daughter, Fatima, moved the Islamic capital to Kufa in southern Mesopotamia. But 'Ali was murdered after only a brief reign. His followers became the Shi'ah (from *Shi'at* 'Ali, the Party of 'Ali), while his rival, Mu'awiyah of Damascus, became caliph and leader of the majority Sunni branch of Islam, transferring the capital to Syria.

Less than a hundred years later, in A.D. 762, a new dynasty of caliphs, the Abbasids, built a new capital at Baghdad that would remain the center of the Islamic empire for nearly five hundred years. During that time, Baghdad was arguably the greatest center of art, learning, and culture in the world and was ruled by storied caliphs such as Harun al-Rashid, famous for his role in the epic *Thousand and One Nights*. In the midst of this golden age, barbarian warriors (at least the Arabs considered them such) from Christian Europe invaded the Levant to seize Jerusalem and other sites considered holy by all three of the great monotheistic faiths. In the long war against these Crusaders, it was another Iraqi—Salah ad-Din, or Saladin, a Kurd from the city of Tikrit—who would turn the tide in favor of the Islamic armies, recapturing Jerusalem and setting in motion the inevitable destruction of the Crusader kingdoms. These glory days ended in the thirteenth century, when Mongol hordes under Hulagu Khan smashed the caliph's armies and sacked Baghdad in 1258, ending the reign of the Abbasids. Although the Mongol conquest was brief, it was terrible, and it broke the power of the Islamic Arabs, paving the way for the rise of the Turkish empires, first of the Seljuks and later of the Ottomans, who would rule Iraq for nearly four hundred years, until the First World War.¹

During the Ottoman era, the territory of Iraq was administered by three separate provinces (*vilayets*). In the north was Mosul *vilayet*, including the cities of Mosul, Kirkuk, Arbil, and as-Sulaymaniyyah and dominated by Sunni Kurds.² In the center was Baghdad *vilayet*, comprising the former Islamic capital, its environs, and the lands to the west that were primarily Sunni Arab. Finally, al-Basrah *vilayet* administered most of the old lands of southern Mesopotamia. It was heavily Shi'ite Arab and included the Shi'ite holy cities of Karbala and an-Najaf.³

After the defeat of the Ottomans during the First World War, their territory was divided up by the British and French, who established mandates over much of the former Ottoman Empire. Britain coveted Baghdad and al-Basrah (what it called "the Mesopotamian provinces") in part for its suspected oil and agricultural wealth, but mostly because London wanted a con-

tiguous land bridge from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean across which it could move forces to defend British India. The British secured the Mediterranean end of this route by acquiring Palestine and Trans-Jordan (later renamed "Jordan"). The eastern end would be the new mandatory territory of Iraq, at first intended to comprise only the Baghdad and al-Basrah provinces. Eventually, London would add Mosul province, not only because it was believed to be rich in oil (later proven by the finding of the massive Kirkuk oil fields in the 1920s) but also to create a buffer zone against Turkey and Russia. As for Iraq's western boundary, it was determined largely by simple geography: the great urban centers of Baghdad and the Mesopotamian valley were divided from those of the Levant by the Syrian desert, and the main transportation artery stretching across it was the Baghdad-Amman road. The British essentially divided that road in half and gave the administration of territory to the west of that midpoint to Jordan, while that to the east went to Iraq. In 1921, the British decided to make Faysal ibn Hussein al-Hashim, the third son of their World War I ally (and Lawrence of Arabia's principal confederate) Sharif Hussein of Mecca, the new king of Iraq.⁴

The Hashimites would rule Iraq for thirty-seven years. It was a turbulent reign because the kings were foreigners installed by the British, whom the Iraqi people quickly learned to hate. Of the three Hashimite kings, only Ghazi, who ruled from 1933 to 1939, had any degree of popularity, because he was anti-British. When he died in an automobile accident in 1939, it was widely believed that London was responsible. In 1936, Iraq was the first Arab nation to experience a military coup, although the generals were seeking only to replace the pro-British cabinet and not the popular King Ghazi. In 1941, with German armored columns driving toward the Middle East from both the west (Rommel's Afrika Corps) and the north (from Russia), a pro-Axis military cabal took power and attempted to evict the British from Iraq with German support. But the British quickly deployed forces from Palestine and India and crushed the revolt. The monarchy was then restored to its full authority and would rule with British approval for another seventeen years.

SADDAM HUSSEIN AND THE BA'TH

Saddam Hussein was born in the small village of al-'Awja outside of the backwater town of Tikrit in northwest Iraq, probably on April 28, 1937.⁵ He was born into the Bayjat clan of the al Bu Nasir tribe, a modest-sized Sunni

tribe. His name, a somewhat unusual one, means "he who confronts." His father, Hussein 'Abd al-Majid, died before Saddam was even born. His mother, Subhah Talfah, remarried quickly, to a man named Hassan Ibrahim, who was known locally as "Hassan the Liar." Hassan and his family reportedly made their living as local bullies and petty thieves.⁶

What little we know about Saddam's early life indicates that it was unpleasant for all involved. Various sources claim that Hassan Ibrahim often beat Saddam with an asphalt-coated stick and kept him busy stealing with his own sons and their cousins. For his part, Saddam was something of a loner, famous for carrying an iron bar wherever he went that he would heat until it was white hot and then use to impale unwary animals—dogs, cats, whatever made the mistake of coming within his reach. When he was ten years old, he was sent off to live with his uncle Khayrallah Talfah, a former army officer who had briefly been jailed for his role in the 1941 pro-Nazi coup attempt. In later years, Khayrallah regaled the world with his philosophy in the book *Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews and Flies*. Saddam's closest friend from childhood was Khayrallah Talfah's son, Adnan, who convinced Saddam to go to school to learn to read and write. Adnan eventually passed the entrance exam to Iraq's military academy, thereby earning a career in the army, but Saddam failed the exam—to his enduring resentment.

As a young man, Saddam got caught up in the maelstrom of Arab politics during the 1950s. In those days, Communists, socialists, Nasserists, Pan-Arabists, and nationalists of every stripe actively vied for power throughout the Middle East. Saddam soaked up the politics of his uncle Khayrallah and Khayrallah's cronies, who included a kinsman and army officer named Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, an important member of the Iraqi Ba'th Party. The Ba'th (Renaissance) Party had started in Syria in the 1930s as one of many Pan-Arabist parties but later sprouted offshoots in Iraq and several other Arab countries. Like numerous other political parties then in vogue, the Ba'th combined socialism and Pan-Arabism in a nebulous and often contradictory philosophy that showed little real erudition or practical knowledge. Its treatises were mostly rhetorical gobbledygook that provided little basis for concrete action. But in this respect too, the Ba'th was not unlike many of its competitors. Saddam himself began carrying a gun and drifted among various groups of Nasserists and Pan-Arabists before eventually falling in with Bakr and the Ba'th. The early Ba'thists were mostly intellectuals, army officers, students, and lawyers; Saddam stood

out for his limited education, money, and manners. His only virtues were his ambition and penchant for violence. He was relegated to a low position within the small Iraqi branch of the Ba'th Party.

In 1958, the monarchy was finally overthrown by General 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, who capitalized on the widespread popular unhappiness with the government because of its failure to provide any support to Nasser's Egypt when it had fought the Israelis, British, and French in the 1956 Sinai-Suez War. When Qasim overthrew the monarchy, Saddam and the Ba'thists rejoiced, only to become quickly disillusioned with the new dictator. The key to Pan-Arabism was the notion of uniting all of the Arab states into one great Arab nation, powerful enough to stand up to the Western powers as an equal. Qasim refused to join the Pan-Arabist vehicle, the new United Arab Republic, which Syria and Egypt had formed under Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser. In addition, Qasim began relying heavily on the Iraqi Communists and increasingly regarded the nationalist and Pan-Arabist parties as enemies. Saddam and the Ba'th's other toughs began mixing it up with their opposites from the Communist Party in bloody gang wars. In 1959, Saddam participated in an assassination attempt against Qasim. He was the seventh member of a seven-man hit team, and his job was to provide covering fire against Qasim's bodyguards to allow the rest of the team to kill the dictator. But Qasim was late on the day of the hit. When he finally arrived, Saddam was so keyed up that he forgot his assignment and instead fired at Qasim too. Thanks to Saddam's impatience, the hit failed: Qasim was seriously wounded but not killed because his bodyguards were able to kill one of the assassins and drive the rest off, wounding Saddam. Eventually, Saddam managed to flee to Syria and from there to Egypt, where he spent three years lying low, debating politics, and waiting to return to Iraq.

The Ba'th finally managed to overthrow Qasim in 1963, but only by combining forces with a group of army officers including Qasim's former accomplice in the 1958 coup, Colonel 'Abd as-Salim Arif. With the Ba'th in the driver's seat, Saddam returned home as a follower of Hassan al-Bakr. However, the Ba'th was ill suited to rule Iraq and no sooner had it taken power in Baghdad than the left and right wings of the party fell to fighting among themselves, leaving Bakr to try to moderate—unsuccessfully. The divisions within the Ba'th then allowed Colonel Arif to turn on them and purge them the next year. While a traumatic event for the party, its ouster proved to be to Saddam's advantage. The radical wings of the party were

purged, and Bakr emerged as the leader of the new Ba'th with Saddam as his right-hand man—a ruthless thug whom Bakr could count on to work tirelessly and do *anything*. Saddam spent two years in prison as a result of his work for Bakr.

'Abd as-Salim Arif ruled Iraq for less than three years before dying in a helicopter crash in 1966. He was succeeded by his less crafty brother, 'Abd ar-Rahman Arif, who managed to hold power for only two years. On July 17, 1968, a combination of the reformed Ba'th Party and another group of high-ranking military officers again overthrew the dictator. Official Iraqi accounts notwithstanding, Saddam played little part in the July 1968 coup that returned the Ba'th to power. However, he was Hassan al-Bakr's right-hand man and quickly became the central cog in the party machine. He was the head of the party's internal security force, the Jihaz Hunin, and was named the deputy secretary-general of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the highest policy-making body, akin to the Soviet Politburo. The Ba'th numbered only about 2,500 members at that time, but they had learned the lesson of their previous experience in power and were not going to be shunted aside by their military compatriots again.⁷ Saddam enforced discipline within the party's ranks and took the offensive against the senior military officers who had helped bring the Ba'th back to power.⁸ He outmaneuvered each of the various groups of officers and then set his sights on potential rivals within the Ba'th, pursuing each in turn until only he and Bakr were left as the unchallenged power brokers of the regime.

By the early 1970s, Saddam had emerged as the regime's *eminence grise*. In 1970, it was Saddam who negotiated the famous "March Manifesto" that granted the Kurds considerable autonomy as a way of ending the nine-year guerrilla war they had been waging against successive Baghdad regimes. In 1974, it was Saddam who decided to renege on the March Manifesto and attack the Kurds. And it was Saddam who negotiated the humiliating Algiers Accord with the shah of Iran in 1975, when the Second Kurdish War blew up in his face. By that point, Saddam had eclipsed Bakr as the de facto ruler of the country, although it was not until 1977, when Saddam convinced Bakr to give up his secondary position as defense minister, that Saddam's position truly became unassailable. Without the defense portfolio, Bakr lost his long-standing ties to the military, and when he handed the position over to Saddam's cousin Adnan Khayrallah (promoted from colonel to major general) this ensured that Bakr could not use the mil-

itary against Saddam. At that point it was simply a matter of time, and in 1979, Bakr was forced to step down. On July 16, 1979, Saddam Hussein assumed the presidency of Iraq.

Like his idol, Josef Stalin, Saddam Hussein quickly set about purging the party and government of any but his most devoted and nonthreatening adherents. In the most famous of the events of this first purge, Saddam convened a meeting of the senior members of the party on July 22. He produced Muhyi 'Abd al-Hussein Mashadi, secretary-general of the RCC. Mashadi had openly opposed Saddam's succession, and when he appeared on the twenty-second, it was physically apparent that he had paid a terrible price for his opposition. In a broken voice, Mashadi read a long, contrived confession regarding a Syrian-backed plot against the nation he had led. Saddam then took the podium and named fifty-four additional conspirators—all of them sitting in the room. As each one's name was read out, armed guards walked down to him and led him out of the auditorium to meet his fate. Many broke down in tears and had to be dragged out by the guards. Many of those who remained began to sob uncontrollably as Saddam read the list of names. That same day, Saddam convened a kangaroo court of high-level officials to try and sentence the guilty. In the coup de grâce of this macabre production, Saddam then ordered all of the other high party officials whose names had not been called to participate in the firing squads that dispatched the victims. In the words of the Iraqi dissident Kanan Makiya, "Neither Stalin nor Hitler would have thought up a detail like that. What Eichmann-like refuge in 'orders from above' could these men dig up in the future if they were ever to marshal the courage to try and depose their Leader? . . . With this act, the party leadership was being forced to invest its future in Saddam."⁹

With this act, Saddam would cement his image as the most ruthless and thorough of Iraq's dictators, a reputation that was already well established from the brutal purges he had conducted as Bakr's second-in-command. During his years waiting in the wings he had developed a host of methods to maintain his power, and these he now deployed to their fullest extent. He had carefully studied the methods of Stalin (and to a lesser extent Hitler) and learned how to apply them to Iraq, and even how to improve on them. He placed only the most trusted personnel in the highest internal security positions. He shifted personnel in lower-level positions constantly to prevent them from building up any kind of a loyal following that could be used in a coup plot. He built multiple agencies with redundant missions and re-

sponsibilities to ensure that nothing would be missed, and to create rivalries that would allow him to play one group off against another. He centralized all power and information in his own hands so that no one else fully understood everything that was going on in the Iraqi state. And he created an atmosphere of merciless cruelty that kept all Iraq in line out of sheer terror.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE PERSIAN GULF, 1800-1980

For America, the lure of the Persian Gulf has long been the lure of commerce. Soon after the end of the Revolutionary War, American merchantmen began venturing into the Indian Ocean to trade with the Arabs of the southern Arabian peninsula. The Sultanate of Muscat, the antecedent of modern Oman, was the first of the states of the region to emerge as an important trade partner for the United States, and on September 21, 1833, representatives of the United States and the sultanate signed a treaty of commerce and friendship. American merchants continued to expand their contacts in the Persian Gulf region throughout the century.

At that time, the region was under the dominance of the British Empire, which tolerated the American trading presence if only because the British had too many other problems in the area. It was an unstable region even then, with religious, ethnic, dynastic, and all manner of political disputes, and the British generally had their hands full. Moreover, this was the era of the "Great Game," when Britain and Russia fought fiercely over the southern half of the Eurasian landmass. At that time, Persia (modern Iran) was a key piece on the board of the Great Game. As U.S. trade expanded, the Persian shah tried on occasion to entangle Washington in an alliance to help him fend off both the British and Russians. But the United States was content to remain a purely mercantile power in the region and carefully sidestepped the shah's entreaties.¹⁰

Then, in 1908, William K. D'Arcy, an Englishman, struck oil near Masjid-i-Sulayman in Persia and changed the world forever. At that time, petroleum was just beginning to become an important industrial fuel, and alone among the great powers of the world, only the United States and czarist Russia were major producers. The rest relied on imports, primarily from America. The opening of the Persian Gulf oil fields now promised a new—and neutral—supply. In 1909, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) began work on a pipeline to transport the oil from their wells to nearby ports on the Persian Gulf. In 1913, the first APOC refinery at

Abadan began production, purifying the oil for use even before it left the shores of the Gulf. The next year, the outbreak of the First World War increased demand for oil, in part because the Royal Navy began converting from coal-burning ships to more efficient oil-burning vessels, and in part because armies soon began adding gasoline-fueled trucks, tanks, and airplanes to their orders of battle.

After the war, the demand for oil continued to grow, and with it so did the hunt for new oil fields in the Persian Gulf region. In 1927, the British discovered oil near Kirkuk in their mandatory territory of Iraq. Although Britain granted Iraq nominal independence in 1932, it continued to run the country behind the scenes and effectively did the same in Persia, allowing it to monopolize the production of Iraqi and Iranian oil. Meanwhile, shut out from oil exploration in Persia, Iraq, and the British protectorate of Kuwait (where oil was discovered in 1938), American oil companies set their sights farther south. In March 1938, only weeks after the discovery in Kuwait, Standard Oil of California (what would later become Chevron) struck oil in eastern Saudi Arabia. By the outbreak of the Second World War, oil production in the Persian Gulf had increased by 900 percent over the previous twenty years, and the region was already recognized as a future oil giant.¹¹

It was World War II that gave the United States its first great geostrategic tug into the Persian Gulf region, and it was the region's oil potential that supplied the pull. Inadequate supplies of oil were critical elements in the eventual collapse of both German and Japanese power. Moreover, the vast logistical efforts of the Allies had been possible only because of the enormous supplies of oil available to them. Although 80 percent of that oil came from the United States, ever larger quantities came from the Persian Gulf states. Saudi Arabia in particular increased production from 580,000 barrels in 1938 to 21 million barrels in 1945 to support the Allied war effort.¹² By 1944, a U.S. government technical report had labeled the Persian Gulf "the center of gravity" of future oil development.¹³ Moreover, the growing realization of the importance of Persian Gulf oil was coupled with a newfound concern about the limits of British military power. During the war, the United States had been compelled to move military forces to defend the region because the British were stretched too thin.

After the war, Britain's weakness in the region increasingly concerned American strategic thinkers, who suffered a further scare when Soviet forces briefly tried to occupy Persia in violation of Stalin's agreements with

Churchill and Roosevelt. Although the United States convinced Moscow to leave Persia in peace, the threat demonstrated that someone would have to see to the defense of the region to protect it against future Soviet challenges. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal recounted a conversation he had with Senator Owen Brewster in May 1947:

I said that Middle East oil was going to be necessary for this country not merely in wartime but in peacetime, because if we are going to make the contribution that it seems we have to make to the rest of the world in manufactured goods, we shall probably need very greatly increased supplies of fuel. Brewster said that . . . Europe in the next ten years may shift from coal to an oil economy and therefore whoever sits on the valve of Middle East oil may control the destiny of Europe.¹⁴

Indeed, the Persian Gulf was fast becoming a principal source of global energy. In 1940, 70 percent of the world's oil production came from the United States, while the Persian Gulf region contributed only 5 percent. By 1955, U.S. oil production had fallen to 43 percent of global production, while that of the Persian Gulf region had climbed to 20 percent.¹⁵ The world needed Persian Gulf oil, and because of its power and its interest in seeing a stable, prosperous world, the United States had to take a hand in ensuring that the oil continued to flow freely. After the war, the United States maintained a small naval task force in the area based in Bahrain in support of the lingering British military presence.

Because the postwar rush to demobilize meant that America could not keep large forces in the Gulf, Washington started to use other methods to secure the region. In 1953, the CIA helped the shah of Iran (now independent and with its modern name) overthrow his socialist prime minister, Muhammad Mossadeq, whom Washington and London feared would nationalize the Iranian oil industry and cast Iran's lot with Moscow. Later the Eisenhower administration would try to defend the Persian Gulf with the same solution it had proffered for the defense of Europe: a regional alliance. The Baghdad Pact, signed by Iraq and Turkey in 1954 and later joined by Great Britain (1954), Pakistan (1955), and Iran (1955), was the fruit of these efforts. Although the United States was not a formal adherent to the treaty, Americans sat on its key committees and were an unmistakable presence in all of its deliberations. But then in 1958, when the pro-British monarchy was overthrown by Qasim, the new dictator pulled Iraq

out of the Baghdad Pact, allied himself with the Iraqi Communist Party, and opened a new relationship with the USSR. In response, Washington ordered the CIA to oust Qasim, although the 1963 coup that succeeded in doing so probably did not have CIA assistance.

For twenty-three years after World War II, the United States was able to play this background role in securing the Persian Gulf because the British remained willing to deploy military forces when other methods would not suffice. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it had been Britain that had done the heavy lifting when military intervention was required in the Gulf—such as sending troops to Kuwait to block an Iraqi invasion in 1961 and crushing insurgents in Aden. However, the U.S. position suddenly became far more complicated in January 1968, when Britain announced that it lacked the strength to maintain its traditional global commitments and so would be withdrawing from “East of Suez” by 1971. To make matters worse, in 1968 the Russians began deploying their own naval forces to the Indian Ocean while the United States was deeply mired in the conflict in Vietnam and could not spare the forces to take over Britain’s role as protector of the Gulf. The United States was in a fix. The solution the Nixon administration devised was to rely on proxies to serve as regional strongmen as a substitute for the commitment of U.S. forces. As Michael A. Palmer has pointed out in his excellent study of U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf region, this was a natural extension of the “Nixon Doctrine,” which called on Asian nations (by which Nixon principally meant Vietnam) to take a greater role in their security and alleviate the military responsibilities of the United States.¹⁶ In the Persian Gulf region, the administration turned to the shah of Iran to be its main enforcer. Almost as an afterthought, Washington also designated Saudi Arabia as a second American proxy, despite the fact that the Kingdom then lacked the economic and political clout it has today and had virtually no military capability. But the Saudis were rich and cooperative, and unlike the Persian Iranians, they were Arabs whom the United States hoped could prevail upon their Arab brothers.

Through much of the 1970s, U.S. policy toward the Persian Gulf region rested on these “Twin Pillars,” as the strategy was called. For the shah in particular, it was a bonanza. The United States gave him *carte blanche* to purchase whatever weapons he wanted—including state-of-the-art F-14 Tomcat fighters and Phoenix long-range air-to-air missiles, which the United States would not sell to anyone else. Iranian defense spending grew at a torrid pace, roughly quintupling between 1969 and 1978.¹⁷ The United

States looked the other way at Tehran’s misdeeds—such as instigating the 1973 oil embargo that caused the first oil crisis in the United States and Europe after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Puffed up with his new weaponry, the shah also began throwing his weight around, intimidating the smaller Gulf states. But he also did act in a manner helpful to the United States. He sent troops to help the pro-U.S. sultan of Oman fight Dhofari rebels backed by Marxist South Yemen. He backed Iraqi Kurdish separatists against the Ba’thist regime in Iraq in conjunction with CIA and Mossad support.¹⁸ And he fought Soviet influence in the Gulf region as fiercely as any U.S. administration could have asked. The Twin Pillars policy seemed so successful that even after the United States pulled out of Vietnam, Washington stuck with it as a way of economizing on U.S. military commitments around the world.

In 1977, the Carter administration took the first tentative steps toward a resumption of direct U.S. responsibility for the security of the Persian Gulf region by inaugurating the formation of a Rapid Deployment Force (RDF), largely for contingencies in the region. However, the RDF was little more than a name on a piece of paper, and the Twin Pillars approach continued to be the guiding force of U.S. policy toward the region. Nevertheless, as part of the development of the RDF concept, Washington took a fresh look at its policies toward the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region and finally articulated the American interests in the region that have guided U.S. policy ever since. In September 1978, the Joint Chiefs of Staff set down three primary U.S. goals:

1. To assure continuous access to petroleum resources.
2. To prevent an inimical power or combination of powers from establishing hegemony.
3. To assure the survival of Israel as an independent state in a stable relationship with contiguous Arab states.¹⁹

For a few more months, the Twin Pillars policy would serve those goals.

THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION, THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR, AND THE TILT TOWARD IRAQ, 1980–1988

Twin Pillars collapsed in January 1979 as revolution swept the shah of Iran from his throne. Without the shah, the stronger of the Twin Pillars was gone, and in his place came the fiery Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, spew-

ing bile against the "Great Satan" (the United States) and the "Little Satan" (Israel), backing a variety of (mostly Shi'ite) Islamic terrorist groups, and calling for Islamic revolutions to uproot the other governments of the region. Things only got worse when in November of that year the Iranians seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking fifty-two American diplomats and Marine guards hostage and tossing the United States into a 444-day nightmare of paralysis and frustration. In less than twelve months, Iran had gone from the United States' principal ally in the region to its bitterest foe.

The wheel of fate turned again in the fall of 1980, when Saddam Hussein, newly anointed as president of Iraq, invaded Iran. Saddam was motivated by a combination of opportunity and fear. On the one hand, he had chafed under the military domination of the shah, who had supported Iraq's Kurdish insurgents and so overawed Iraq militarily that Baghdad had been forced to sign the humiliating Algiers Accord, which had demarcated its border and the Shatt al-Arab waterway to Iran's liking. But Saddam also had his eyes on a bigger prize: Iran's southwestern province of Khuzestan, populated mostly by ethnic Arabs and containing the vast bulk of Iran's oil reserves. In 1980, Iraq was producing 6 million barrels of oil per day and Iran 5 million barrels, almost all from Khuzestan. The combined 11 million barrels per day would have amounted to 20 percent of global oil consumption and given Saddam economic wealth and power greater than that of Saudi Arabia.²⁰ Meanwhile, the Iranian armed forces had been ravaged by the revolution, purged by the ayatollahs for their prior close ties to the United States, and their equipment had been sabotaged by many of the shah's loyalists (not to mention departing U.S. military advisers). To Saddam, Iran looked weak and Khuzestan looked vulnerable.

Saddam was also driven by fear, however. The majority of Iraq's population was (and still is) Shi'ite Arab, although the Baghdad regime was overwhelmingly Sunni Arab. Iran's population is mostly Shi'ite, and Saddam feared that the ayatollah's revolution would light a fire among Iraq's own Shi'ah. His fears weren't entirely baseless. Prior to the invasion, Shi'ite clerics in Iraq had organized some of the most important resistance to his regime. Moreover, Khomeini had lived in Iraq for a number of years while in exile (until the shah had insisted that Baghdad kick him out in 1977), and the Shi'ah of southern Iraq still remembered the charismatic ayatollah and his mesmerizing sermons. Thus, Saddam attacked Iran in the hope not only of reversing the terms of the Algiers Accord and conquering

Khuzestan but also of toppling the new Iranian regime and preventing it from igniting a revolution in Iraq.²¹

The initial invasion of Iran was not the blitzkrieg Saddam had envisioned. Between September and December 1980, Iraqi forces lumbered clumsily into southwestern Iran against little opposition. The Iranians were paralyzed and distracted by their own internal problems but quickly began to recall military personnel dismissed by the revolution, form local bands of Revolutionary Guards, and buy up weapons wherever they could. The Iraqi invasion was one of the most inept military operations of the twentieth century: it failed to occupy any of the major cities in Khuzestan except one, it failed to reach the (undefended) Iranian oil fields, and it failed to block the mountain passes through which Iranian reinforcements had to flow. By January 1981, the Iraqis had been stopped by meager Iranian opposition with virtually nothing to show for their efforts. That month, the Iranians launched the first of a series of counteroffensives that mauled the Iraqi Army and, by the end of May 1982, had expelled Iraqi troops from Iran altogether. In mid-1982, Ayatollah Khomeini decided to make good on his promise to spread the Islamic revolution and liberate the Shi'ite holy sites of an-Najaf and Karbala in southern Iraq. In July, he launched Operation Blessed Ramadan, a massive offensive to conquer al-Basrah, Iraq's second largest city and the "capital" of Shi'ite southern Iraq. After six weeks of horrific fighting, the Iraqis stopped Iran, but just barely. Turned away at al-Basrah, Iran still would not relent in its invasion of Iraq, and for the next five years Tehran pounded on Iraq's defenses, trying to overthrow Saddam and reach the oil kingdoms beyond Iraq's borders.²²

In the meantime, Iraq had suffered another humiliating defeat. On June 7, 1981, fourteen Israeli warplanes flew across the Arabian desert undetected and obliterated Iraq's Osiraq reactor at Tuwaitha, just outside Baghdad.²³ At the time, Osiraq was the key to Saddam's nuclear weapons program and the French-built reactor was due to go online within a matter of weeks. The daring Israeli raid single-handedly set Iraq's nuclear bomb program back by several years. However, it taught the Iraqis an important lesson. Thereafter, Saddam ordered a redoubling of the Iraqi program but this time he ordered multiple, redundant facilities, heavily defended, hardened against attack, and camouflaged against detection. These practices would eventually allow Iraq to keep most of its vast WMD programs hidden from the United States during Operation Desert Storm, preserving far more of these facilities than the United States had ever dreamt the Iraqis possessed.

For the United States in the 1980s, the prospect of an Iranian victory over Iraq was so terrifying that the Reagan administration decided it had to shore up Iraq against the ayatollah's legions. Washington had never cared much for the Ba'hist regime or Saddam Hussein. They were brutal thugs, and he was a first-class tyrant. What's more, Iraq under the Ba'ath had continued to flirt with the Soviet Union, signing a treaty of friendship in 1972 and purchasing large amounts of weapons. Iraq had also sent large armored forces to fight against Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, was a key supporter of several Palestinian terrorist groups, and had led the condemnation of Egypt for signing the Camp David Peace Accords with Israel in 1978.²⁴ Nevertheless, Saddam and Iraq suddenly took on a rosier hue when they became the only thing standing between revolutionary Iran and the Persian Gulf oil fields.

The first signal of what would become a U.S. "tilt" in favor of Iraq came in February 1982, when the Reagan administration removed Iraq from its list of terrorism-supporting states (where it had been a charter member). Washington claimed that this was in recognition of diminished Iraqi support for terrorism, but at that time, the evidence of such a diminution was scanty at best. In fact, only a few months later, in June 1982, Iraq would instigate the assassination of Israel's ambassador to Great Britain to try to spark the long-expected Israeli invasion of Lebanon that Saddam hoped would create a new Arab-Israeli war that would somehow convince Iran to cease combat operations against Iraq in order to concentrate its forces against Israel. (This hare-brained scheme did cause the Israeli invasion of Lebanon but had no impact on the ayatollah, who continued to proclaim that the road to Jerusalem ran through Baghdad.)²⁵ Nevertheless, taking Iraq off the terrorism list—no matter how cynical the reasoning—removed a number of hurdles that would have hindered U.S. support for Iraq. Soon thereafter, Washington began passing high-value military intelligence to Iraq to help it fight the war, including information from U.S. satellites that helped Iraq fix key flaws in the fortifications protecting al-Basrah that proved important in Iran's defeat the next month.²⁶

U.S. support for Iraq blossomed throughout the war. Starting in 1983, the United States provided economic aid to Iraq in the form of Commodities Credit Corporation guarantees to purchase U.S. agricultural products—\$400 million in 1983, \$513 million in 1984, and climbing to \$652 million in 1987. This allowed Iraq to use money it otherwise would have spent on food to buy weapons and other military supplies. With Iraq off the

terrorism list, the U.S. could also provide quasi-military aid. For example, Washington sold Baghdad ten Bell UH-1 Huey and sixty Hughes MD-500 Defender helicopters that were ostensibly in "civilian configurations" but that Iraq very quickly converted to military use. Iraq was also able to purchase large numbers of trucks that Washington knew would go to its war effort. Then, in March 1985, the United States began issuing Baghdad high-tech export licenses that previously had been denied. The sophisticated equipment Iraq bought with these licenses proved crucial to its weapons of mass destruction programs. In addition, the Reagan administration kept ratcheting up its level of intelligence cooperation with Baghdad, eventually authorizing a liaison relationship between U.S. intelligence agencies and their Iraqi counterparts. Perhaps more than anything else, the high-quality intelligence the U.S. regularly furnished Baghdad regarding Iranian forces and operations proved vital to Iraq's conduct of the war.²⁷

Finally, Washington encouraged its allies to similarly support Iraq against Iran. Britain extended agricultural products, and sold high-tech goods and even some weaponry. France had a strong relationship with Iraq that predated the war—it was France that had sold Iraq a nuclear reactor in 1976 that was ostensibly for energy production but that the French knew was intended to produce nuclear weaponry. Consequently, it did not take much encouragement for France to deepen its ties to Iraq. By 1982, Iraq accounted for 40 percent of French arms exports. Paris sold Baghdad a wide range of weapons, including armored vehicles, air defense radars, surface-to-air missiles, Mirage fighters, and Exocet antiship missiles.²⁸ German firms also rushed in without much compunction, not only selling Iraq large numbers of trucks and automobiles but also building vast complexes for Iraq's chemical warfare (CW), biological warfare (BW), and ballistic missile programs. Although Iraq did pretend that it was purchasing the German equipment and expertise for civilian purposes, the disguise was ridiculously thin and no perceptive German scientist could have bought the ruse.²⁹ But in the 1980s, no one in the West asked too many questions about what Saddam was being allowed to purchase as long as it would help defeat the Iranians.

The United States also tolerated a great deal from Iraq. Washington chose not to raise a diplomatic ruckus when an Iraqi Mirage pilot inadvertently put his Exocet missiles into the side of an American frigate, the USS *Stark*, killing thirty-seven sailors.³⁰ The Reagan administration largely turned a blind eye when Iraq started employing the WMD capabilities the

Germans (among others) were helping them to acquire. In its desperate efforts to convince Iran to make peace, Iraq dumped chemical warfare agents on Iranian troops, hit Iranian cities with missiles and air strikes, and attacked Iranian tankers and oil facilities—each of which prompted Iran (sooner or later) to respond in kind. Iraq first used chemical warfare to try to defeat Iranian human-wave attacks in late 1983. In March 1984, a U.N. report documented Iraq's usage, at which point the United States issued a formal denunciation. Washington did press the Europeans—especially Germany—to tighten their export controls. However, the Reagan administration refused to further censure Iraq or even reduce its own support and blocked a congressional resolution that would have imposed sanctions on Iraq. Moreover, the protests to the European countries were little more than slaps on the wrist and did not have any discernible impact.³¹

In retrospect, the most reprehensible of Saddam's actions that the United States and Europe chose to overlook was his campaign against Iraq's own Kurds known as al-Anfal, a twisted reference to a verse in the Quran. When the Iranians counterattacked in 1982, they opened a front in Kurdistan. Seeing an opportunity to be rid of Saddam's rule, the Kurds joined the Iranians in fighting the Iraqi Army. In March 1987, Saddam appointed his murderous cousin 'Ali Hassan al-Majid governor of northern Iraq. It was superfluous to give him orders to get control of the Kurds any way he could—'Ali Hassan only knew one way. Less than six weeks after his appointment, 'Ali Hassan had employed chemical warfare to wipe out several towns in the Balisan valley, where the PUK's main headquarters was located. The following year, with Iranian troops threatening key Iraqi positions, 'Ali Hassan unleashed the al-Anfal campaign, an operation of biblical brutality. Iraqi forces began clearing areas of Kurdish residence with massive bombardments of chemical weapons and high explosives, followed by army sweeps that often killed anyone left alive and razed to the ground anything left standing. On March 15, 1988, 'Ali Hassan conducted his most famous attack, swamping the Kurdish town of Halabja with several varieties of CW and killing at least five thousand Kurdish civilians. When the campaign finally ended in 1989, some two hundred thousand Kurds were dead, roughly 1.5 million had been forcibly resettled, huge swaths of Kurdistan had been scorched by chemical warfare, and four thousand towns had been razed.³² The U.S. Senate passed a bill to impose sanctions on Iraq, but the Reagan administration prevailed upon the Congress to drop the matter.³³

Of course, Washington did get something from its support for Saddam. First, Iraq was able, just barely, to hold the Iranians at bay. Indeed, by 1986, the war seemed mired in a World War I-like stalemate with little expectation of a breakthrough by either side. Second, Iraq made sure that the United States was well compensated, paying off all of its loans to the United States on time and, in 1987, offering the United States \$1 off the world price on each barrel of Iraqi oil. As a result, American consumption of Iraqi oil quadrupled, from 30 million barrels in 1987 to 126 million in 1988.³⁴ Saddam also responded to White House entreaties on other issues of importance to America, evicting many members of the notorious Palestinian terrorist organization Abu Nidal from Baghdad and mostly preventing Abu Abbas's Palestine Liberation Front from conducting operations.

In addition, Saddam adopted the cause of a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Arabs, supporting virtually every effort toward peace during the 1980s, although it is clear that this was only a tactical move intended to secure the American support he needed. In a 1982 interview in *Time* magazine, Saddam was asked about the recent peace initiative of Saudi King Fahd, and he responded, "We favor it with minor adjustments. . . . We favor what the Palestinians accept."³⁵ This was a monumental turnabout for Iraq, which previously had been a leading Arab hard-line state. That same year, Saddam told King Hussein of Jordan that he would back the Jordanians if they moved forward on peace negotiations based on the Reagan peace plan of September 1982. In November 1984, Saddam's foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, went to Washington to normalize ties with the United States and announced that Iraq would accept "a just, honorable, and lasting settlement" to the Arab-Israeli conflict. At the time, this was an extremely propeace position and was seen as a betrayal by Saddam's erstwhile allies among the Arab radicals—Syria and Libya.³⁶ The next month, Saddam himself took another step, stating publicly that "No Arab leader looks forward to the destruction of Israel" and that peace would have to include "the existence of a secure state for the Israelis."³⁷ In the mid-1980s, this was about as far in favor of peace as any Arab government would go, basically putting Iraq in the propeace camp with Egypt. And Iraq would maintain this propeace posture throughout the war. In fact, in December 1988, four months after the end of the war with Iran, the PLO publicly recognized Israel's right to exist, and Iraq, along with Egypt, supported PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat in taking this dramatic step. In the end, Iraqi and Egyptian support shielded the PLO from Syria's wrath and made it possible for Arafat to do so.³⁸

Nevertheless, Saddam was never fully comfortable with his relationship with the United States. High-ranking Iraqi defectors report that Saddam was always suspicious of America's motives, given Washington's previous dislike of Iraq. In addition, Saddam continued to believe that the U.S. and Israeli governments were virtually inseparable and that Israel had aggressively been helping Iran throughout the war. Saddam saw his suspicions confirmed with the 1986 revelation that the Reagan administration had secretly been selling weapons to Iran in what later came to be known as the Iran-*contra* scandal. The United States had sold Iran weapons via Israel, including thousands of sophisticated tube-launched optical-tracking wire-guided (TOW) antitank missiles and Homing-All-the-Way-Killer (HAWK) surface-to-air missiles, in a bid to get Iran to release American hostages held by Iran's Lebanese ally, Hizballah. Although Saddam never forgot this American perfidy, Iraq was too desperate for America's assistance for Saddam to complain.

The prevailing stalemate along the Iran-Iraq front was shattered in February 1986, when Iran launched a sudden amphibious assault across the Shatt al-Arab and caught the Iraqi defenders by surprise. Picked Revolutionary Guards swarmed over the Iraqi lines, capturing the al-Faw peninsula—the southernmost tip of the country and Iraq's only coastline—and threatening al-Basrah from the south. Saddam responded with a vast counterattack accompanied by air strikes and massive doses of chemical warfare, but it failed miserably. Stymied on the ground, Saddam reacted by ratcheting up his attacks on Iranian cities and Iran's oil exports. The Iranians responded in kind. They deployed Chinese Silkworm antiship missiles on the al-Faw peninsula and used them to shoot at oil tankers loading at Kuwaiti oil terminals, across the Persian Gulf. (Kuwait and the other oil kingdoms had banded together to form the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, and all of them were providing Iraq with huge loans and other support to fight the Iranians. Hence, Iran considered them allies of Iraq.) In addition, Iran stepped up its attacks on Iraqi and GCC tankers in the Persian Gulf and began setting up Silkworm launch sites along the Strait of Hormuz.

Although in the short term these developments were advantageous for Iran, they set into motion a train of events that led to Tehran's eventual defeat. First, the humiliating defeat at al-Faw allowed Iraq's generals to convince Saddam that he had to completely reform his army to be able to defeat the Iranians on the ground. Throughout the war, Saddam had been forced to relinquish ever greater control over operations to his professional

military officers, and now he removed the last remaining shackles. In response, the Iraqi General Staff took the Republican Guard, previously the regime's palace guard, expanded it, retrained it, re-equipped it, and turned it into the elite of the Iraqi armed forces. When the Iranians launched another massive offensive against al-Basrah in 1987, it was the reformed Republican Guard that ultimately defeated them in bloody combat at the gates of the city. Meanwhile, Kuwait had approached the United States about protecting its oil exports by reflagging its tankers under American colors, which would then be escorted by the U.S. Navy. Initially, Washington balked at the idea, but when Kuwait then turned to the Russians, the United States quickly changed its mind. Finally, with European assistance, Iraq had achieved an important technological breakthrough, modifying its old Russian-made Scud ballistic missiles to more than double their normal range of three hundred kilometers, albeit with less accuracy and a lighter warhead. Previously, Iraq had been at a distinct disadvantage in that Baghdad was only about a hundred kilometers from the Iranian border—putting it within easy range not only of Iranian air strikes but even of Iran's own Scuds—while Tehran was nearly six hundred kilometers from the Iraqi border, well beyond the range of Iraq's Scuds and far enough that Iraqi air strikes were difficult and vulnerable to the Iranian air defenses. With their new, modified Scuds (which they called "al-Husseins"), the Iraqis could rain down missiles on Tehran unimpeded.

These changes set the stage for the climactic battles of 1988. In February, Iraq fired the first al-Husseins at Tehran, and over the next six months launched nearly two hundred at Iranian cities, mostly Tehran and Iran's spiritual center at Qom. When rumors spread in Iran that Iraq was loading the missiles with chemical warheads, nearly a million people fled the Iranian capital. Then, on April 17, 1988, Iraq launched its first major ground offensive since 1980, employing the Republican Guard as the spearhead of an armored assault on the Iranian positions on al-Faw. In a single day, the Guard and several army formations swept aside the Iranians after a terrifying preliminary bombardment of artillery and chemical warfare. The next day, the United States conducted Operation Praying Mantis. In response to Iran's mining of the Strait of Hormuz (and the damage to a U.S. naval vessel that had struck an Iranian mine while escorting reflagged Kuwaiti tankers), the U.S. Navy engaged the Iranian Navy in the Gulf, sunk two of Iran's biggest surface ships and crippled a third. Over the next three months, Iraq staged four more ground offensives, each of which was led by

the Republican Guard, featured punishing artillery and chemical warfare bombardments, and smashed important elements of the Iranian armed forces. By the end of July, the Iranian Army was down to about two hundred operable tanks while Iraq was routinely deploying two thousand or more for a single operation.³⁹ As a kind of coup de grâce, on July 3, U.S. forces engaged some of the remnants of the Iranian Navy in the Strait of Hormuz and an Iranian civilian jet strayed over the battle area. The USS *Vincennes* mistook the airliner for an Iranian fighter and shot it down. Although it was a mistake, in Tehran it was viewed as a sign that the United States was now actively allied with Iraq and would take any action—including deliberately killing Iranian civilians—to defeat Tehran.⁴⁰ In August, even the Ayatollah Khomeini, who had resisted all previous pleas to end the war, was forced to concede that Iran could not fight both Iraq and the United States any longer. Tehran accepted a cease-fire with Iraq that brought the war to an end.

After eight long years of war with Iran, Iraq had won—but at a terrible price. Iraq had had roughly 200,000 men killed in battle and another 400,000 to 500,000 wounded. With its population of only 18 million, that would be the equivalent of having nearly 10 million Americans killed or wounded in a war. Baghdad had borrowed heavily to finance the war and by 1988 owed \$86 billion, of which about \$40 billion was owed to the GCC states and the rest to Western powers.⁴¹ No one really expected Iraq to pay off the money owed to the other Arab states, but as long as the loans remained on the books they hurt Iraq's credit rating, hindering it from borrowing more. The damage from the war had been heavy, and estimates of the cost to rebuild the country ranged from \$200 billion to \$230 billion.⁴² What's more, Saddam had little to show for his effort. He had not conquered Khuzestan and ended up with only a few small scraps of Iranian territory with no real strategic value. Nor had the Islamic republic fallen as Saddam had hoped. The only tangible asset Iraq took away from the war with Iran was its newfound military might. With roughly 1.2 million men under arms, Iraq had the largest military in the Middle East and the fourth largest in the world. Iraq had a range of weapons of mass destruction and considerable experience using them in battle. What's more, Iraq was building a gigantic military-industrial infrastructure to further expand its military capabilities.

It was this end to the Iran-Iraq War that set the stage for the next phase of U.S.-Iraqi relations. Iraq had paid a terrible price for its meager victory

and had little to show for its efforts except a vast military machine. However, to win the war, Iraq had distorted its economy and virtually bankrupted itself. These unsatisfying results would soon set Saddam looking for new prizes that would afford him the glory he felt he deserved but had been denied. Meanwhile, Washington had worked so hard to ignore Saddam's obvious flaws that it had essentially convinced itself that Saddam was little different from other brutal dictators with whom the United States had developed long and profitable relationships. Many saw Saddam as little worse than Ferdinand Marcos, Augusto Pinochet, or the shah of Iran and began to think that he might actually take the place of the shah in a revival of the Twin Pillars policy. These misperceptions set Baghdad and Washington on the road to the long confrontation that has dominated U.S.-Iraqi relations ever since.

THE THREATENING
STORM

The Case for Invading Iraq

KENNETH M. POLLACK



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