

IRAQ: FROM SUMER TO SADDAM

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LIBYA: The Struggle for Survival

Iraq: From Sumer to Saddam

Geoff Simons

Foreword by

Tony Benn, MP

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
PART I IRAQ IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER	1
1 After the 1991 Gulf War	3
The Face of Iraq	4
The Face of Kuwait	17
Post-War Chronology	24
The Saddamgates	47
Other Exposés and Unanswered Questions	55
The Turkish Factor	60
The Survival of Saddam	63
The Bush Finale	69
Enter Bill Clinton	73
PART II THE HISTORY OF IRAQ	77
2 The Ancient Crucible	79
Beginnings	79
Sumer	81
Akkad	86
Babylonia	87
Assyria	91
The Jews	96
The Persians	99
The Greeks	101
Romans and Parthians	102
The Sassanians	103

3	The Arabs, Islam and the Caliphate	105
	Arab Origins	105
	Mohammad	108
	The Framework of Islam	109
	The Arab Conquest	111
	Schism	113
	The Umayyad Dynasty	116
	The Abbasid Dynasty	120
	Decline	122
4	Seljuks, Mongols and Ottomans	126
	End of the Abbasids	126
	The Seljuks	127
	Impact of the Crusades	130
	Mongol Onslaught	134
	Ottoman Conquest	139
	Ottoman Decline	143
5	The Western Impact	147
	Early Interests in Mesopotamia	147
	The Lure of Oil	150
	The Demise of the Ottomans	154
	The Sykes–Picot Agreement	161
	Colonial Interregnum	164
	Towards Independence	183
6	From Monarchy to Republic	190
	The Growth of Nationalism	190
	Towards the Coups	193
	The Emergence of Ba’athism	200
	The Israel Factor	203
	Prelude to Suez	210
	Revolution and Aftermath	217
	The Ba’athists in Power	226
	The Impact of Oil	234
7	Into the Era of Saddam	237
	Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti	237

The Ba'athist Coup	243
The Kurdish Question	263
Iran–Iraq War	271
Western Support for Saddam	283
US Business and Saddam	291
PART III TOWARDS THE NEW WORLD ORDER	297
8 War with the West	299
Countdown	299
Iraq's Grievances	304
The American 'Green Light'	311
The Invasion of Kuwait	317
The Fabrication of Consensus	319
George Bush	325
The Chronology of Conflict	327
<i>Notes</i>	347
<i>Bibliography</i>	376
<i>Index</i>	382

Foreword

The 1991 Gulf War was hailed by many people, including those who prided themselves on their liberal outlook, as the first example of the New World Order made possible by the end of the Cold War.

We were told that the international community, using the United Nations as its founders intended, would defeat and probably overthrow a brutal dictator by means of weapons of clinical accuracy, deploying the minimum force possible, and hence pave the way for democracy and a lasting settlement of the problems of the Middle East.

It is now clear that what happened was very different from this official explanation of events.

The United Nations was actually taken over and used by the United States to secure its strategic oil supplies at a time when the USSR was disintegrating. The bombing was on a horrific and quite unnecessary scale which inflicted untold suffering on the Iraqi civilian population both at the time and subsequently.

A feudal king in Saudi Arabia was protected and the undemocratic Al-Sabah family was re-installed in Kuwait; Saddam's harsh regime, originally built up with enthusiastic Western help, was actually consolidated in Iraq; and the double standards of the West, with respect to the Palestinians, stand out more glaringly than ever.

When a superpower war machine gets going and the media puts itself at the disposal of the political leaders and generals who are cranking it up, all understanding is driven from the airwaves and the newspapers to ensure public support for that war. So it was during that short and bloody conflict.

No-one was allowed to hear about the long history of Iraq or its civilisation, its relations with its neighbours or what happened when Britain governed it. All parallels with other Western military interventions and non-interventions were discouraged, as were comparisons with the conduct of Israel or Turkey.

There was tight censorship of the war reports and then a deadly media silence about the carnage caused by the bombing and the suffering that followed, so that we were never permitted to hear of the many thousands of civilian deaths for which we were collectively responsible.

That whole horrific story and the background which explains it has been waiting to be told. Here Geoff Simons tells the Iraq story with scholarship, clarity and great moral force, making this a book for the general reader as

well as for the academic student of the Arab world and its relations with the West.

TONY BENN

Preface

The 1990/91 Gulf crisis stimulated Western interest in Iraq and yielded a number of books (most listed in the Bibliography). These volumes, almost without exception, followed a common pattern: whilst often outlining the circumstances of the crisis (sometimes giving historical background), there was rarely any attempt to chart in detail many of the historical events that would inevitably fuel future tensions in the region.

Nor, in my view, was adequate attention ever given to the United States, a principal player in the crisis. It was increasingly recognised – who could deny it? – that the US had aided Saddam in the Iran/Iraq war and after, that Washington had given Saddam the ‘wrong signals’ prior to the invasion of Kuwait, and that Washington had then worked hard to suborn the UN Security Council. Even so, the ethical discourse was inadequate.

Hence this book was written to position the ‘Iraq Question’ in a broad historical and ethical context. The ambitious breadth has inevitably entailed the reluctant sacrifice of much detail. It seems to me none the less that there is enough here to expand the moral universe of conventional discourse – about both Iraq and broader political questions. We need to reaffirm the principle that the protocols of international behaviour are properly sanctioned by ethics, not by the perceived self-interest of this or that state, even if a hegemonic power.

GEOFF SIMONS

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Tony Benn MP for enthusiastically welcoming this book and for writing the Foreword. His achievements are many and too rarely noted. Above all, his example will always help to sustain the subversive idea that the proper spirit of politics is morality, not the tawdry obsession with an accountant's balance sheet.

I appreciate also the work and commitment of Christine Simons. Her support through the writing and production of this book has been invaluable. She too believes that there is more to politics than money-grubbing exploitation and the propaganda designed to protect it.

GEOFF SIMONS

Introduction

When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 – to begin a war that would last most of the decade – the West was not too concerned. A nominal consensus to prevent arms reaching both sides in the conflict was systematically violated in various ways. In particular, the United States developed a manifest ‘tilt’ towards Iraq which resulted in both covert and overt aid, a posture that was to become highly controversial after the 1990/91 Gulf crisis.

Iraq had, in its aggression against a sovereign state, violated the United Nations Charter. The West made no effort to activate the Security Council in a violent response to the Iraqi invasion. There was no prospect of launching missiles and bombers against Baghdad, no prospect of a US-orchestrated coalition turning the Iraqi deserts into killing fields.

Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait – an act that grew directly out of the Iran/Iraq war – was however an entirely different matter. Soon Iraq was branded a ‘pariah nation’, its leader a ‘new Hitler’. The scene was set for a devastating but brief war, with hundreds of thousands of (mainly Iraqi) casualties, vast regional ecological damage, immense harm to many Third-World economies, and prodigious dissipation of treasure.

In Part I (Chapter 1) a description is given of the state of Iraq and Kuwait in the immediate aftermath of the war: the fruits of comprehensive bombing, ground battles, massacre and torture. Then attention is given to some of the (Western) lies and unanswered questions, the clues to hidden agendas, the mounting evidence of double standards. A post-war chronology is presented which ends with how the defeated Saddam consolidated his post-war power while the victorious George Bush passed into history.

Part II (Chapters 2 to 7) gives a history of the region now known as Iraq. It is difficult to comprehend the richness of this multifaceted historic culture; to grasp how tribes, peoples and nations clashed and cross-fertilised in one of the principal crucibles of world civilisation. Irrigation specialists from ancient Sumer, the architects and astronomers of Babylon, siege engineers from China, the Abbasid scholars and law-givers, Alexander and Kublai Khan, Tamerlane and Saladin – all left their indelible marks. From the Code of Hammurabi to the polities of the Caliphate, the Ottomans and the British Empire, systems of ethics and law, the impact of Judaism, Islam and Christianity – all are touched upon, too briefly but enough to give a flavour of the myriad cultures to which Mesopotamia (later Iraq) was exposed.

The rise of Arab culture and its decline are charted (Chapter 3) with attention to the life of Mohammad, the birth of Islam, and the Arab conquests. The dynasties of the Caliphate that came to influence much in the enduring cultures of modern Syria and Iraq – and much in the historic pride in the Arab nation – are described. Then the Mongol horde and fresh sackings of Baghdad, as a prelude to the Ottoman conquest (Chapter 4) and the impact of Western colonialism (Chapter 5) – both of which Arab nationalists would learn to confront with a resurgent self-confidence and growing success.

Today, at a time when the West pretends to be concerned at the plight of the Iraqi Kurds, it is useful to highlight the enduring Western hypocrisy. In the 1920s the British used machine guns and bombs to suppress both the northern Kurds and the southern marsh Arabs. Colonel Boussett, a medical officer with the Royal Artillery, then noted in his diary that the burning Arab villages made a ‘wonderful sight at night’. Poison gas was a particularly useful weapon (Winston Churchill: ‘I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes . . . gases can be used which . . . spread a lively terror’). General Sir Aylmer Haldane suggested that gas was particularly useful in the hilly country of the Kurds, whereas ‘in the hot plains . . . the gas is more volatile’ (see Lawrence James, *Imperial Rear-guard*, 1988). (Today the Turkish regime continues to repress its own Kurdish minority, a sustained policy that has involved torture, mass killings and the forcible emptying of 1000 Kurdish villages; and which in June 1993 led Kurdish protesters to occupy government buildings in eighteen cities in Germany, France and Switzerland. The Turkish suppression of its Kurds is never denounced by Western governments. Turkey is a NATO member and of crucial strategic importance.)

Iraq then moves from British-imposed monarchy to an independent republic (Chapter 6), and thence into the era of Saddam, heir not only to Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar, but also to political brutalities, Machiavellian plotting, and the naked consolidation of power. Saddam practised torture, exterminated rivals, and gassed his countrymen.* At the same time he stimulated pride in some sections of the Iraqi people, giving a boost to Arab nationalism and anti-Zionism throughout the region. The West too found reasons to support Saddam Hussein, perceiving that the Iranian ayatollahs who had recently and roughly evicted the pro-West shah might

*Saddam immortalised Halabja by his gassing of the Kurds in 1988. In one important account the Kurds died of Iranian- not Iraqi-delivered cyanide gas, with other doubts expressed about Iraqi culpability (see Bennis and Moushabeck, eds, *Beyond the Storm*, p. 311). However, here and elsewhere I have echoed the conventional Western account of Halabja as clear evidence of Saddam’s perfidy.

be best tamed by the Iraqi despot. But Saddam then trod on sensitive US toes by (briefly) deposing the Kuwaiti al-Sabahs (which was of no concern to Washington) and taking command of Kuwaiti oil (which concerned Washington greatly). The scene was set for war.

Chapter 8 describes how Washington gave a 'green light' to Saddam, seemingly encouraging the invasion of Kuwait, before setting out to subvert the United Nations so that Iraq could be 'legally' and unambiguously crushed. A chronology of the war is given, ending in the 'turkey shoot' massacres perpetrated by Christian forces in their new crusade against a Muslim foe. The Kuwaiti and Iraqi deserts were turned into mass graveyards, while the West rejoiced at its self-proclaimed virtue and its much-advertised prowess in the fine art of human slaughter.

There had been an orgy of killing, visited largely on hapless Iraqi conscripts trapped in the desert far from home. We should remember this. Saddam immortalised Halabja. Soon afterwards, the US-led forces immortalised the slaughters of Fallujah, Amiriya and Mitla Ridge. And remember Milan Kundera who said (in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, p. 5): 'The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. The present book – in recording various historical themes and details of recent events – is intended in part to jog the memory.