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1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank) 2. REPORT DATE 16 Apr 93 3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED FINAL

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Republic of IRAQ: A Country Study 5. FUNDING NUMBERS

6. AUTHOR(S) PATRICIA A: FLANNERY LT COL, USAF

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) AIR WAR COLLEGE 325 CHENNAULT CIRCLE MAXWELL AFB AL 36112-6427

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER Unnumbered AWC research paper

9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A

10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER N/A

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AUG 11 1994

11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES PAPER IS WRITTEN TO FULFILL ACADEMIC RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS FOR AN IN-RESIDENCE SENIOR SERVICE PROFESSIONAL MILITARY SCHOOL.

12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED

12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE

13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words)

14. SUBJECT TERMS Republic, Iraq, Country, study

15. NUMBER OF PAGES 25

16. PRICE CODE

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT UNCLAS

18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE UNCLAS

19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT UNCLAS

20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UL

AIR WAR COLLEGE
AIR UNIVERSITY

REPUBLIC OF IRAQ:
A COUNTRY STUDY

by
Patricia A. Flannery
Lt. Colonel, USAF

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Unannounced	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Distribution /	
Availability Codes	
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IN
FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM
REQUIREMENT

Advisor: Colonel Edward U. Mangis

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA
16 April 1993

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IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

The pattern of diplomatic relations between Iraq and the United States is riddled with inconsistencies and mistrust. The recent flurry of U.N. violations, bombings, denials, retribution and exaggerated rhetoric is merely the latest chapter in, what may be, the most frustrating and misguided U.S. national security strategy in the Southwest Asia Gulf region. In order to understand the current contentious issues it is necessary to review a little of Iraq's history and demography.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND RELIGIONS/ETHNIC SPLIT

Iraq covers an area slightly larger than the state of California and has a population of approximately 20 million. Approximately 20 percent of Iraq's population are Sunni Arabs, most of whom reside in the area north of Baghdad between the two rivers. Another 20 percent are Kurds (a non-Arab and mostly Sunni Muslim people) who live in the mountains in the north. The Shi'ite Arabs, who make up about 55 percent of the population reside in the fertile, densely inhabited river plain south of Baghdad. (38:58)

GEOGRAPHY

While the Tigris and the Euphrates define the core of Iraq, "they do not delimit its outer boundaries, which for the most part are without historical basis." The borders of the contemporary state of Iraq were established by the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, which in effect divided up the Ottoman Empire in the first World War. Iraq's borders with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria were rather arbitrarily drawn by the British and have little historical basis. Even though Iraq's borders with Iran and Turkey do have an historical basis in the Ottoman and Persian Empires, they, too, create problems. The Turkish border, for example, arbitrarily divides the Kurdish population, and creates untold problems for both Turkey and Iraq. (38:58)

Iraq's borders have led to problems in the region for several reasons. First, because of its open terrain, and because it is encircled, it has always been vulnerable to invasion from all sides. Second, its two largest cities, Baghdad and Basra, both lie within seventy miles of the Iranian border and are vulnerable to attack. Third, and perhaps most important, Iraq is practically landlocked. The Shatt al-Arab is the only maritime route to Iraq's interior; Iraq only has twenty-six miles of Persian Gulf coast. (38:58)

HISTORY

Iraq, which lies between the Euphrates and Tigris, was once known as Mesopotamia or "the land between the rivers," and was probably the earliest center of human civilization. It was here that the first city-states grew and writing was invented. The Sumerians and their successors, the Babylonians and the Assyrians made tremendous advances in mathematics, astronomy, architecture, and law. In fact, the Code of Hammurabi (ruler of Babylon, 1792-1750 B.C.) contained the world's earliest written laws. (6:25)

In the five centuries following the Arab conquest of Iraq in 634 A.D., Baghdad grew into an international center of knowledge and trade. It was during this "Golden Age of Islam," as this period came to be known, that the first seeds of the pan-Arab movement were probably sowed.

From 1535 until World War I, Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire. Arabic was downgraded as a language and much of the splendor of the previous eras fell into ruin. The capture of Baghdad, in 1623, by the Safavids of Persia (Iran) had long term religious and cultural repercussions in the area. The Safavids proclaimed Shi'ism as the official religion of their dynasty, while the Ottomans became more strictly Sunni. Sixteen years later, Baghdad was restored to the Ottoman Empire only to be lost again. (6:26)

As a result of a series of secret agreements, the Ottoman Empire was divided up following the First World War and Iraq came under British occupation. Britain's main strategic concern in the area was in protecting its vital links to India, the Suez Canal, the Gulf and its oil interests in Iran. The British installed Faisal, a member of the Hashemite family and the son of Sherif Hussain of Mecca, as king of Iraq, and set up a "national" government which could be counted on to protect British strategic interests. His brother Abdullah became ruler of Jordan. In 1932, Iraq was declared independent; it became a constitutional monarchy and entered the League of Nations.

By the end of the second World War, anti-British and anti-monarchist opposition had grown increasingly strong while communism, Nasserism, Ba'athism and other forms of pan-Arab nationalism gained popularity. Iraq joined the United Nations in 1945 and became a founding member of the Arab League. The 1948 Palestine War, the nationalization of Iranian oil, and the regime's support of the U.S. sponsored 1955 Baghdad Pact helped to ignite anti-British feelings. In July 1958, the army staged a coup which resulted in the monarchy being overthrown and General Abd al-Karim Qasim being installed as the new ruler. King Faisal II and Prime Minister Nuri al-Said were killed in the coup. (6:27)

Although Iraq became a republic in July, 1958, the turbulence has not abated over the last thirty-five years. General Qasim was assassinated in February 1963, when a group of Ba'athists and Nasserists took power. General Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr became prime minister, and Colonel Abd al-Salam Arif became president. Less than a year later, President Arif and the Nasserists led a coup ousting the Ba'athists from the coalition. They then staged a July 1968 coup, and installed al-Bakr as president and chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). In July 1979, al-Bakr resigned (or was ousted), and Saddam Hussein (his vice president, a distant relative and the real power behind the throne) assumed both positions. In order to maintain his position, Saddam Hussein continued to purge those who opposed or criticized him. (43:1)

WATER

Because the supply of fresh water is scarce and diminishing, it is of great value in most of the Middle East. Consequently, many experts feel that water may become as important a resource in the region by the twenty-first century as oil is today. Whether it becomes the next cause of conflict in the region may depend upon how well disputes are handled politically. "Competition

over the region's already rapidly depleting water resources will lead to massive political and economic upheavals and result in wars between the contending states." (33:22)

Iraq is an almost totally land-locked country, with its access to the sea limited to the Khor Abdallah, a long narrow inlet that borders Kuwait, and the Shatt al-Arab, a narrow outlet to the sea, a waterway that borders Iran. Forty percent of Iraq's surface area is desert, located mostly in the west. The remainder consists of highlands in the northeast and alluvial plains and marshlands in the central and southern regions.

The Tigris and the Euphrates both rise in the mountains of southeastern Turkey and flow across the lowlands of Syria and Iraq to form the Shatt al-Arab at Basra, just above the head of the Persian Gulf. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers are important because they allow barge navigation between Iraq's two largest cities, Baghdad and Basra. However, even more important is the fact that they are the primary source of irrigation and provide some hydroelectric power in the region. (43:1)

Tigris-Euphrates Basin

The Tigris-Euphrates basin is a complicating factor in the political relations between Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

Turkey, like most Middle East countries where the waters actually rise within their borders, argues that because both the Tigris and the Euphrates rise in Anatolia, Turkey is entitled to make full use of all waters in her territory. The Syrians and the Iraqis, understandably, argue that there should be international agreements concerning the equitable sharing of the waters that flow through all three countries. Although, Turkish officials have repeatedly made assurances that they would not deprive Syria and Iraq of water, recent water development projects have caused both countries to express concern on several occasions during the last several years. (29:3)

There are several inconsistencies and ironies in the three countries official positions. First, although Syria is quick to condemn Turkey for its policies and claims certain "downstream" rights, it denies those same privileges to Iraq, who is downstream from her. Second, it is Iraq who has historically been the largest user of water from this system and is, therefore, the most vitally concerned about its flow and is the most dependent on it. Iraq, therefore, must reach agreements with both Syria and Turkey for its very survival. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that Syria supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq war and that both Syria and Turkey were alligned

with the coalition against Iraq in the recent Gulf War. Further, all three countries have invested in large-scale dam projects and plan to irrigate, usually to the consternation of its neighbors. (30:60)

Turkey-Iraq Water Relations

In 1983, Turkey began the largest of these irrigation programs, the South-East Anatolia Project known by its Turkish acronym GAP (Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi). GAP actually consists of thirteen subprojects comprising irrigation and hydroelectric dam sites. Six of these sites are on the Tigris River and the other seven sites are on the Euphrates. When completed the project will supply almost half of Turkey's current energy needs. (34:29)

The massive Atatürk Dam is the largest of the thirteen dams and was completed in 1989. (7:27) In January 1990, Turkey drastically reduced the flow of the Euphrates River for a month in order to fill the lake behind the Dam. As a result, Iraqi and Syrian hydroelectric stations and irrigation schemes were unable to function at full capacity and both governments protested loudly. In response, Turkey offered to "compensate her neighbors for the month-long loss of

Euphrates water by boosting the river's flow between November and January." Iraq was not satisfied and still mistrusts Turkish intents. Iraq has argued that additional dam construction would cut the Euphrates "annual flow into Iraq of 22 billion cubic meters anywhere from 50 to 75 percent." (34:29)

Syria-Iraq Water Relations

The situation between Syria and Iraq is only slightly better. In 1974-1975 Syria reduced the amount of water flowing into downstream Iraq in order to fill its Ath-Thawrah (or Euphrates) Dam. Iraq claimed Syria's actions adversely affected three million Iraqi farmers. Only Saudi mediation induced Syria to release additional waters from Lake Assad into Iraq and war was narrowly averted. In April 1990, Syria and Iraq signed an agreement in Tunisia allocating fifty percent of the Euphrates waters to Iraq. (33:23)

Iraq-Iran Shatt al-Arab Dispute

The Shatt al-Arab is formed by the "confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers just above Basra in Iraq and carries these and the waters of a downstream Iranian tributary, the Karun," into the Arab (or Persian) Gulf. Throughout history, the border along the Shatt al-Arab has

led to dispute between Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Persia (Iran). The Shatt al-Arab is primarily a boundary, not a water-right, problem between Iran and Iraq. Shatt al-Arab navigation rights in the 19th and 20th centuries have only been an issue during war and neither side has ever attempted to deny shipping or access in peace time.

(15:88)

Although the exact border between Iraq and Iran and use of the Shatt al-Arab was a contentious issue for hundreds of years, in 1937 the two countries signed the Boundary Treaty. The treaty stated that Iraq would control the Shatt al-Arab "except for a four-mile stretch opposite Abadan" at which point the boundary would be moved out to midchannel or to the thalweg. The treaty also reaffirmed that the Shatt al-Arab was open to shipping of all nations. Although the issue (and debate) was subdued for almost twenty years (even through World War II), it erupted again in 1954 when Iran complained that Iraq was not using all the revenues collected by the Basra Port Authority for the maintenance and improvement of the river in accordance with the treaty.

The military coup in Iraq in 1958 and the fear of growing Arab nationalism resulted in the Shah of Iran publicly demanding that the Iraq-Iran frontier along the

river be moved to the thalweg (midchannel). Finally, when the Ba'ath Party came to power in Iraq in 1968 the Shah of Iran abrogated the 1937 treaty and announced that it recognized the thalweg as the international frontier in the Shatt al-Arab. Border clashes erupted between the two countries until finally, in 1975, Saddam Hussein of Iraq was forced (in the face of Iran's superior military might) to agree to a treaty with the Shah of Iran which recognized the thalweg.

The treaty lasted until the Shah's overthrow in 1979. Within a year Saddam Hussein abrogated the treaty, demanded complete sovereignty over the entire Shatt al-Arab, and launched a major military offensive into the Iranian territory. The war raged for eight years and both sides lost thousands of men. Unfortunately, the truce finally signed in 1988 did not settle the issue. For the present, the Iraq and Iran have agreed to the thalweg as the border--a situation Iraq finds intolerable and which may lead the another war within the decade. (15:98)

POLITICAL INSTABILITY

In 1513 Nicolo Machiavelli wrote The Prince, which advised would-be rulers that "he who becomes master of a city accustomed to freedom and does not destroy it, may

expect to be destroyed by it....for in truth there is no safe way to retain them otherwise than by ruining them."

Machiavelli went on to say,

but when cities or countries are accustomed to live under a prince, and his family is exterminated, they, being on the one hand accustomed to obey and on the other hand not having the old prince, cannot agree in making one from amongst themselves, and they do not know how to govern themselves. For this reason they are very slow to take up arms, and a prince can gain them to himself and secure them much more easily.
(33:8)

Power, Politics and the Ba'ath Party

In President Saddam Hussein's rise to power and his continued control of Iraq we see these Machiavellian principles in operation. In February 1963, after calling the Iraqi Communist Party a part of the "rotten, renegade, atheistic storm that had broken over Iraq," the Iraqi National Guard (with the help of the CIA) identified, arrested and executed between 3000 and 5000 Communists. The National Guard, by carrying out these summary executions virtually eliminated the major opposition to the Ba'ath Party.

In 1977, Saddam declared that "every Iraqi citizen is a Ba'athist even if he has not joined the Ba'ath Party." The Ba'ath party (under Saddam's close personal attention, of course) controls everything, including the education system, social organizations and the cultural programs of

the entire country. Non-Ba'athist are banned from employment and educational institutions. Saddam's methods of dealing with opposition and deserters are simple, if ruthless. Those who oppose him face torture, arrest, "disappearance" and death. Thus, over the last few decades any opposition party has not only been eliminated, its members have been exterminated, as well. (9:32)

The Saddam regime has also turned its attention to Iraqi Jews and "imperialist." In 1968, the Ba'athist claimed that it had broken up a Zionist spy ring and for a period of twenty-four hours publicly hanged its members and supporters. Those executed were not in reality spies, but the executions did serve one important purpose: members of the political and educated elite were eliminated and opposition to the Ba'ath regime dwindled. (38:94)

The essential core of Ba'athism is pan-Arabism, a doctrine that claims that there is but one Arab nation and demands the establishment of one Arab state. Ethnic and linguistic differences should be suppressed. Clearly, Saddam Hussein sees Iraq, and himself as the primary leaders in this movement. He portrays himself as a modern day Nebuchadnezzar, the sixth century B.C. Babylonian ruler, who conquered Jerusalem and sent the Hebrews into captivity. (13:163) Saddam himself put it this way:

We don't look on this piece of land, here in Iraq, as the ultimate limit of our struggle. It is part of a larger area and broader aims, the area of the Arab homeland and the aims of Arab struggle. (27:69)

Clearly, in Saddam Hussein's eyes, there is no room in this Arab nation for Israel. In this area, at least, he has been extremely consistent over the years and argues that this is the "most important Pan-Arab issue which occupies the mind of every Arab citizen." He further maintains, that the "Arab people will never submit to any decision which they do not believe provides the ultimate conclusion" to their struggle. (27:113-115)

THE KURDS

The Kurds, a non-Arab and mostly Sunni Muslim people, reside primarily in three Middle East countries: Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Of the estimated 20-25 million Kurds, approximately four million of them reside in Iraq. Since both Iran and Turkey have larger Kurdish populations, it is inaccurate, and perhaps dangerous, to assume that this is an exclusively Iraqi problem. (45:475)

The Kurds have a long history of being at odds with the Iraqi, Iranian and Turkish governments because of their desire to establish a Kurdish nation. Each of these nations have, at different times, supported and exploited the Kurdish population in their neighbors' country with

the intention of causing instability. During the Iran-Iraq war the Kurds were courted by the Iranian government and later joined the fighting on the side of Iran. In response, "Iraqi forces undertook a forced resettlement program in 1988 and 1989, during which Kurdish villages were attacked with chemical weapons." Thousands of Kurds were killed in the town of Halabja alone. (43:B-4)

The massive revolt launched by the Iraqi Kurds following the Gulf War focused the world's attention on a long standing problem in the region. The Kurds were encouraged by statements from the international coalition, which called for the overthrow of the Iraqi government, and believed they would receive international support in their attempts to gain an independent state. The Kurds rose up and captured most of the Kurdish-occupied cities and areas in Iraq. However, when the U.S. and other coalition nations did not come to the aid of the Kurds militarily, the Iraqi government succeeded in putting down the revolt. Thousands of Kurds fled to Turkey. After receiving reports of widespread disease and hunger, the UN persuaded Iraq to withdraw from the Kurdish area. (43:B-3) Although negotiations have begun between the Kurds and the Iraqi government, no solution to this long standing problem has been agreed upon. (31:17)

ECONOMICS: A HAVE OR HAVE NOT NATION?

With its estimated 100 billion barrel oil reserve, and natural gas reserves of 28.8 trillion cubic feet, Iraq is definitely a "have" nation. Unfortunately, as a result of its military build-up, expensive wars with Iran and Kuwait, and extensive war debts, Iraq's citizens are reduced to a "have not" existence. (43:5)

Iraq's economy is dominated by a heavy dependence on oil exports and an emphasis on development through central planning. Since taking power, the Ba'ath Party has used Iraq's large oil earnings to revamp the economy and transform it into one of the most modern in the Middle East. In fact, even during the 1980's, the Ba'athist developed the economy, which continued to grow throughout the Iran-Iraq war. However, since the invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent damage inflicted, by the coalition, on power plants, roads, bridges, and industrial facilities, Iraq has not been able to rebuild its infrastructure. (43:4) This damage, in addition to the huge war debts have set back Iraq's economy 40 years. Even worse, for the Iraqi people, inflation is over 20% and food prices rose 2,000% during the last year. (22:9)

Prior to its 1980 invasion of Iran, petroleum accounted for over 99% of Iraq's merchandise exports. Oil production was about 3.5 million barrels per day and Iraq had amassed an estimated \$35 billion in foreign exchange reserves. Iran's destruction of Iraqi oil export platforms early in the Iran-Iraq war, coupled with Syria's closure of its pipeline in 1982, reduced Iraqi exports to approximately 20% of its prewar levels. By 1985, work was completed on a spur line connecting Iraq's oil fields with Saudi Arabia, and this, along with the oil Iraq was able to export through Turkey, and the Mina Bagn terminal enabled her to boost production to over 5 million barrels per day. (43:5)

Disagreement over Iraqi oil production levels and Kuwait's unwillingness to forgive Iraqi war debts led to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. After the invasion, the UN imposed a total boycott on the export of Iraqi products, and has demanded that a percentage of Iraq's oil earnings be withheld for reparations and payment of debts. Saddam Hussein refused to comply, virtually shut down oil production, and has attempted to seek relief from the UN sanctions. To date, he has been unsuccessful, and, until dramatic changes are made, the Iraqi economy can only be viewed as a "basket case." (43:6)

MILITARY IMBALANCE

The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 had a traumatic effect on all the reactionary rulers in the Middle East, and especially on Iraq. Saddam Hussein gave refuge to the deposed Shah's generals as he rushed to strengthen his ties with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Huge arms deals were made with France and Italy. Finally, in September 1980, Saddam announced the abrogation of the treaty that he had signed with the Shah concerning to Iran-Iraq border. Later that month, Iraq invaded Iran in what turned out to be a bloody eight year war, which was fought to a standstill. (9:51-52)

Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait and most of the Gulf states supported Iraq in its war with Iran and Saddam Hussein gained prestige in the international community. Only Syria, Libya, and South Yemen supported Iran. Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia expedited the transport of consumer goods through their ports and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait extended Iraq "tens of billions of dollars in aid and interest free loans" to finance the war. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait also agreed to ship their own oil to Iraqi customers, with the understanding that Iraq would pay them back some day.

Dispite gross human rights violations, the United States and most western nations supported Iraq for two reasons. First, they believed that if Iran went unchecked it could dominate the region and cause further instability. Iraq was the only Arab country with enough military strength to stand up to Iran. Second, the U.S. feared the effect an Iranian victory would have on oil prices. (13:163)

Although the Iran-Iraq war finally ended after eight years of fighting, issues were raised that have lasting long term implications. Control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway is still of concern to both Iran and Iraq. Also Kuwait's attempt at collecting its "war debts" inflamed Saddam Hussein and gave him one more reason to invade in 1990.

The most serious implication of the Iran-Iraq war, was that Iraq was left with one of the largest and best equipped military forces in the world. In spite of this, it was still spending 35 percent of its GNP on military equipment. Although the eight year war had totally depleted and exhausted Iran, Iraq emerged as the strongest military power in the region. Consequently, Saddam Hussein was able (and willing) to invade and annex Kuwait, believing that no country in the Middle East was strong

enough to check him. Additionally, Iraq was capable of producing chemical weapons and was well on its way to developing a nuclear capability. Had it not been for Saddam's terrible miscalculation in believing that the "Superpowers," and especially the United States, would not intervene in the region, Iraq would now be an unmatched power in the Middle East. Fortunately, for U.S. strategic interests in the area, Saddam's dreams of glory are on hold--but only for the time being. (18:181)

CONCLUSION

The balance of power in the Middle East has been sadly upset during the last several years. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait severely altered its position in the world and it is now almost a pariah nation. Iraq has managed to alienate everyone of her neighbors, and cannot be counted on to promote anything but Saddam's personal interests. The economic sanctions, imposed by the United Nations Security Council, make it almost impossible for Iraq to re-emerge as a force in the Middle East, anytime in the near future. Between the \$70 billion in foreign debts, and the \$80 billion in reparations some Kuwaitis are demanding, it will be many years before Iraq can even begin to rebuild its economy.

In the mean time, although Iraq's oil reserves are estimated at 100 billion barrels (second only to Saudi Arabia's) Saddam Hussein is refusing to produce and export oil until Iraq is given relief from the sanctions. Iraq is desperately attempting to rebuild its infrastructure, which was destroyed in January-February 1991. Iraq is "down" but is certainly not "out." With its high oil assets and the regions' growing concerns over Iran, Iraq could, if it developed a more moderate political posture, emerge again as an important influence in the region.

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