

A question of trust: Iraqis, the US, and regime change

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There are many reasons why Iraqis who have long sought to topple Saddam Hussein are opposed to the impending war. One of them is the lack of trust in their newly found allies, the Republican administration in the United States. This, after all, is not the first time the US has pursued regime change in Iraq. All previous attempts ended with disastrous consequences for the Iraqi people.

The first time the US is believed to have been involved in regime change in Iraq was 1963. Many in Iraq believe that the 8 February coup of that year, which brought the Ba'athist movement to power for the first time, benefited from CIA support. Saleh Mahdi Ammash, one of the coup's main perpetrators and a close comrade (later executed) of Saddam Hussein, was attributed with a remark that became famous: 'we came to power on an American train' (others have sourced it to the interior minister, Ali Saleh).

At the time of the coup, Iraq was run by Abd-al Karim Qasim [1], a nationalist general who had seized power in 1958 on the back of a popular uprising against the British-supported monarchy. He had joined OPEC and was taking steps to nationalise the Iraqi oil industry. The US and Britain perceived Qasim to be strongly influenced by communists. Saddam Hussein, who launched a failed assassination attempt against him in 1959, was part of the 1963 takeover. Thousands of supporters of the Qasim regime were murdered, imprisoned and tortured. The coup, one of the most brutal episodes in Iraq's modern history, was a harbinger of things to come.

The second time the US attempted regime change [2] in Iraq was 1975. This time Saddam Hussein was the target. The regime he had led from the position of vice-president (to Ahmed Hasan al-Bakr) had just succeeded in nationalising the Iraqi oil industry with Soviet help. The Soviet Union bought Iraqi oil for several months after nationalisation, allowing Iraq to survive an embargo imposed by multinational oil companies. Iraq was also an active member of the Arab campaign for 'oil as a weapon in the battle' against Israel which triggered the 1970s oil crisis.

In 1975, the Shah of Iran, a long-term US ally in the region was engaging the Iraqi army in a territorial dispute over the Shatt al-Arab estuary. The Shah and the US were also encouraging the Kurds to attack Iraqi troops in the north, supplying them with weapons for this purpose. Saddam Hussein and the Shah then signed a peace agreement in which Iran received major territorial concessions (those concessions later served as the pretext for the Iraq-Iran war [3] of 1980-88). In exchange, Iran and the US abandoned the Kurds and allowed Saddam to crush their rebellion. The leader of the Kurds [4] at that time was Mustafa Barzani (the father of the current Kurdish Democratic Party leader Massoud). He went into exile in the US and later died there. Saddam Hussein's troops ransacked the Barzani villages and killed every male they could lay their hands on.

Towards the end of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, George Bush senior issued his famous call for regime change in Iraq. Lamenting that the United Nations (UN) mandate did not allow him to extend the battle for the liberation of Kuwait into one for the liberation of Iraq, he invited the Iraqi people to finish the job and join the community of freedom-loving nations.

The Iraqis did indeed rise against the regime, liberating fourteen out of eighteen Iraqi provinces. Under the terms of the Safwan ceasefire agreement [5], all of Iraq was a no-fly zone at the time. This prevented the regime from moving its elite troops fast enough to quell the uprising.

The regime was wary of moving its elite troops by road in case they were attacked by allied aircraft, as had happened with the massacre of retreating regular troops at Mutla Ridge on the Kuwait–Basra highway. Iraqi generals approached their US counterpart Norman Schwarzkopf with a request to allow the use of helicopters and safe passage for the Republican Guards. Their request was promptly granted. They then proceeded to quell the uprising with customary brutality. It is estimated that 200,000 Iraqis were killed. Tens of thousands of Kurds fled in terror across the mountains, fearing Iraqi chemical attacks. Many of them died.

The sanctions effect

The story of US attempts at regime change in Iraq does not end in 1991. Such a political intention lies behind the UN sanctions imposed since then. It is often argued that Iraqis unhappy with the life of want and deprivation under the sanctions regime [6] would turn on their government.

Unfortunately, the sanctions – which have brought misery to millions of Iraqis for the past eleven years – have done nothing to weaken the regime. Quite the opposite; they have provided Saddam with an alibi for his failings and continued misappropriation of the country's resources. Poverty [7], far from mobilising Iraqis against the regime, has made it easier to control the population. The smuggling and black market economy sustained by the sanctions is one of the regime's main pillars today.

There is a wartime Russian saying: a trusted friend is someone you could go with on a reconnaissance mission. At a recent meeting of the Iraqi Society at London's Imperial College, Iraqi students in their early twenties were divided and confused. Some supported the impending war unequivocally; others had major misgivings. But all agreed that the current US administration is not one with whom they would go on a reconnaissance mission of this magnitude.

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