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U.S. Had Key Role in Iraq Buildup

Trade in Chemical Arms Allowed Despite Their Use on Iranians, Kurds

by Michael Dobbs

High on the Bush administration's list of justifications for war against Iraq are President Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons, nuclear and biological programs, and his contacts with international terrorists. What U.S. officials rarely acknowledge is that these offenses date back to a period when Hussein was seen in Washington as a valued ally.

Among the people instrumental in tilting U.S. policy toward Baghdad during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war was Donald H. Rumsfeld, now defense secretary, whose December 1983 meeting with Hussein as a special presidential envoy paved the way for normalization of U.S.-Iraqi relations. Declassified documents show that Rumsfeld traveled to Baghdad at a time when Iraq was using chemical weapons on an "almost daily" basis in defiance of international conventions.

The story of U.S. involvement with Saddam Hussein in the years before his 1990 attack on Kuwait -- which included large-scale intelligence sharing, supply of cluster bombs through a Chilean front company, and facilitating Iraq's acquisition of chemical and biological precursors -- is a topical example of the underside of U.S. foreign policy. It is a world in which deals can be struck with dictators, human rights violations sometimes overlooked, and accommodations made with arms proliferators, all on the principle that the "enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Throughout the 1980s, Hussein's Iraq was the sworn enemy of Iran, then still in the throes of an Islamic revolution. U.S. officials saw Baghdad as a bulwark against militant Shiite extremism and the fall of pro-American states such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and even Jordan -- a Middle East version of the "domino theory" in Southeast Asia. That was enough to turn Hussein into a strategic partner and for U.S. diplomats in Baghdad to routinely refer to Iraqi forces as "the good guys," in contrast to the Iranians, who were depicted as "the bad guys."

A review of thousands of declassified government documents and interviews with former

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policymakers shows that U.S. intelligence and logistical support played a crucial role in shoring up Iraqi defenses against the "human wave" attacks by suicidal Iranian troops. The administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush authorized the sale to Iraq of numerous items that had both military and civilian applications, including poisonous chemicals and deadly biological viruses, such as anthrax and bubonic plague.

Opinions differ among Middle East experts and former government officials about the pre-Iraqi tilt, and whether Washington could have done more to stop the flow to Baghdad of technology for building weapons of mass destruction.

"It was a horrible mistake then, but we have got it right now," says Kenneth M. Pollack, a former CIA military analyst and author of "The Threatening Storm," which makes the case for war with Iraq. "My fellow [CIA] analysts and I were warning at the time that Hussein was a very nasty character. We were constantly fighting the State Department."

"Fundamentally, the policy was justified," argues David Newton, a former U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, who runs an anti-Hussein radio station in Prague. "We were concerned that Iraq should not lose the war with Iran, because that would have threatened Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Our long-term hope was that Hussein's government would become less repressive and more responsible."

What makes present-day Hussein different from the Hussein of the 1980s, say Middle East experts, is the mellowing of the Iranian revolution and the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait that transformed the Iraqi dictator, almost overnight, from awkward ally into mortal enemy. In addition, the United States itself has changed. As a result of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, U.S. policymakers take a much more alarmist view of the threat posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

U.S. Shifts in Iran-Iraq War

When the Iran-Iraq war began in September 1980, with an Iraqi attack across the Shatt al Arab waterway that leads to the Persian Gulf, the United States was a bystander. The United States did not have diplomatic relations with either Baghdad or Tehran. U.S. officials had almost as little sympathy for Hussein's dictatorial brand of Arab nationalism as for the Islamic fundamentalism espoused by Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. As long as the two countries fought their way to a stalemate, nobody in Washington was disposed to intervene.

By the summer of 1982, however, the strategic picture had changed dramatically. After its initial gains, Iraq was on the defensive, and Iranian troops had advanced to within a few miles of Basra, Iraq's second largest city. U.S. intelligence information suggested the Iranians might achieve a breakthrough on the Basra front, destabilizing Kuwait, the Gulf states, and even Saudi Arabia, thereby threatening U.S. oil supplies.

"You have to understand the geostrategic context, which was very different from where we are now," said Howard Teicher, a former National Security Council official, who worked on Iraqi policy during the Reagan administration. "Realpolitik dictated that we act to prevent the situation from getting worse."

To prevent an Iraqi collapse, the Reagan administration supplied battlefield intelligence on Iranian troop buildups to the Iraqis, sometimes through third parties such as Saudi Arabia. The U.S. tilt toward Iraq was enshrined in National Security Decision Directive 114 of Nov. 26, 1983, one of the few important Reagan era foreign policy decisions that still remains classified. According to former U.S. officials, the directive stated that the United States would do "whatever was necessary and legal" to prevent Iraq from losing the war with Iran.

The presidential directive was issued amid a flurry of reports that Iraqi forces were using chemical weapons in their attempts to hold back the Iranians. In principle, Washington was strongly opposed to chemical warfare, a practice outlawed by the 1925 Geneva Protocol. In practice, U.S. condemnation of Iraqi use of chemical weapons ranked relatively low on the scale of administration priorities, particularly compared with the all-important goal of preventing an Iranian victory.

Thus, on Nov. 1, 1983, a senior State Department official, Jonathan T. Howe, told Secretary of State George P. Shultz that intelligence reports showed that Iraqi troops were resorting to "almost daily use of CW" against the Iranians. But the Reagan administration had already committed itself to a large-scale diplomatic and political overture to Baghdad, culminating in several visits by the president's recently appointed special envoy to the Middle East, Donald H. Rumsfeld.

Secret talking points prepared for the first Rumsfeld visit to Baghdad enshrined some of the language from NSDD 114, including the statement that the United States would regard "any major reversal of Iraq's fortunes as a strategic defeat for the West." When Rumsfeld finally met with Hussein on Dec. 20, he told the Iraqi leader that Washington was ready for a resumption of full diplomatic relations, according to a State Department report of the conversation. Iraqi leaders later described themselves as "extremely pleased" with the Rumsfeld visit, which had "elevated U.S.-Iraqi relations to a new level."

In a September interview with CNN, Rumsfeld said he "cautioned" Hussein about the use of chemical weapons, a claim at odds with declassified State Department notes of his 90-minute meeting with the Iraqi leader. A Pentagon spokesman, Brian Whitman, now says that Rumsfeld raised the issue not with Hussein, but with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz. The State Department notes show that he mentioned it largely in passing as one of several matters that "inhibited" U.S. efforts to assist Iraq.

Rumsfeld has also said he had "nothing to do" with helping Iraq in its war against Iran. Although former U.S. officials agree that Rumsfeld was not one of the architects of the Reagan administration's tilt toward Iraq -- he was a private citizen when he was appointed Middle East envoy -- the documents show that his visits to Baghdad led to closer U.S.-Iraqi cooperation on a wide variety of fronts. Washington was willing to resume diplomatic relations immediately, but Hussein insisted on delaying such a step until the following year.

As part of its opening to Baghdad, the Reagan administration removed Iraq from the State Department terrorism list in February 1982, despite heated objections from Congress. Without such a move, Teicher says, it would have been "impossible to take even the modest steps we were contemplating" to channel assistance to Baghdad. Iraq -- along with Syria, Libya and South Yemen -- was one of four original countries on the list, which was first

drawn up in 1979.

Some former U.S. officials say that removing Iraq from the terrorism list provided an incentive to Hussein to expel the Palestinian guerrilla leader Abu Nidal from Baghdad in 1983. On the other hand, Iraq continued to play host to alleged terrorists throughout the '80s. The most notable was Abu Abbas, leader of the Palestine Liberation Front, who found refuge in Baghdad after being expelled from Tunis for masterminding the 1985 hijacking of the cruise ship Achille Lauro, which resulted in the killing of an elderly American tourist.

Iraq Lobbies for Arms

While Rumsfeld was talking to Hussein and Aziz in Baghdad, Iraqi diplomats and weapons merchants were fanning out across Western capitals for a diplomatic charm offensive-cum-arms buying spree. In Washington, the key figure was the Iraqi chargé d'affaires, Nizar Hamdoon, a fluent English speaker who impressed Reagan administration officials as one of the most skillful lobbyists in town.

"He arrived with a blue shirt and a white tie, straight out of the mafia," recalled Geoffrey Kemp, a Middle East specialist in the Reagan White House. "Within six months, he was hosting suave dinner parties at his residence, which he parlayed into a formidable lobbying effort. He was particularly effective with the American Jewish community."

One of Hamdoon's favorite props, says Kemp, was a green Islamic scarf allegedly found on the body of an Iranian soldier. The scarf was decorated with a map of the Middle East showing a series of arrows pointing toward Jerusalem. Hamdoon used to "parade the scarf" to conferences and congressional hearings as proof that an Iranian victory over Iraq would result in "Israel becoming a victim along with the Arabs."

According to a sworn court affidavit prepared by Teicher in 1995, the United States "actively supported the Iraqi war effort by supplying the Iraqis with billions of dollars of credits, by providing military intelligence and advice to the Iraqis, and by closely monitoring third country arms sales to Iraq to make sure Iraq had the military weaponry required." Teicher said in the affidavit that former CIA director William Casey used a Chilean company, Cardoen, to supply Iraq with cluster bombs that could be used to disrupt the Iranian human wave attacks. Teicher refuses to discuss the affidavit.

At the same time the Reagan administration was facilitating the supply of weapons and military components to Baghdad, it was attempting to cut off supplies to Iran under "Operation Staunch." Those efforts were largely successful, despite the glaring anomaly of the 1986 Iran-contra scandal when the White House publicly admitted trading arms for hostages, in violation of the policy that the United States was trying to impose on the rest of the world.

Although U.S. arms manufacturers were not as deeply involved as German or British companies in selling weaponry to Iraq, the Reagan administration effectively turned a blind eye to the export of "dual use" items such as chemical precursors and steel tubes that can have military and civilian applications. According to several former officials, the State and Commerce departments promoted trade in such items as a way to boost U.S. exports and

acquire political leverage over Hussein.

When United Nations weapons inspectors were allowed into Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, they compiled long lists of chemicals, missile components, and computers from American suppliers, including such household names as Union Carbide and Honeywell, which were being used for military purposes.

A 1994 investigation by the Senate Banking Committee turned up dozens of biological agents shipped to Iraq during the mid-'80s under license from the Commerce Department, including various strains of anthrax, subsequently identified by the Pentagon as a key component of the Iraqi biological warfare program. The Commerce Department also approved the export of insecticides to Iraq, despite widespread suspicions that they were being used for chemical warfare.

The fact that Iraq was using chemical weapons was hardly a secret. In February 1984, an Iraqi military spokesman effectively acknowledged their use by issuing a chilling warning to Iran. "The invaders should know that for every harmful insect, there is an insecticide capable of annihilating it . . . and Iraq possesses this annihilation insecticide."

Chemicals Kill Kurds

In late 1987, the Iraqi air force began using chemical agents against Kurdish resistance forces in northern Iraq that had formed a loose alliance with Iran, according to State Department reports. The attacks, which were part of a "scorched earth" strategy to eliminate rebel-controlled villages, provoked outrage on Capitol Hill and renewed demands for sanctions against Iraq. The State Department and White House were also outraged -- but not to the point of doing anything that might seriously damage relations with Baghdad.

"The U.S.-Iraqi relationship is . . . important to our long-term political and economic objectives," Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy wrote in a September 1988 memorandum that addressed the chemical weapons question. "We believe that economic sanctions will be useless or counterproductive to influence the Iraqis."

Bush administration spokesmen have cited Hussein's use of chemical weapons "against his own people" -- and particularly the March 1988 attack on the Kurdish village of Halabjah -- to bolster their argument that his regime presents a "grave and gathering danger" to the United States.

The Iraqis continued to use chemical weapons against the Iranians until the end of the Iran-Iraq war. A U.S. air force intelligence officer, Rick Francona, reported finding widespread use of Iraqi nerve gas when he toured the Al Faw peninsula in southern Iraq in the summer of 1988, after its recapture by the Iraqi army. The battlefield was littered with atropine injectors used by panicky Iranian troops as an antidote against Iraqi nerve gas attacks.

Far from declining, the supply of U.S. military intelligence to Iraq actually expanded in 1988, according to a 1999 book by Francona, "Ally to Adversary: an Eyewitness Account of Iraq's Fall from Grace." Informed sources said much of the battlefield intelligence was channeled to the Iraqis by the CIA office in Baghdad.

Although U.S. export controls to Iraq were tightened up in the late 1980s, there were still many loopholes. In December 1988, Dow Chemical sold \$1.5 million of pesticides to Iraq, despite U.S. government concerns that they could be used as chemical warfare agents. An Export-Import Bank official reported in a memorandum that he could find "no reason" to stop the sale, despite evidence that the pesticides were "highly toxic" to humans and would cause death "from asphyxiation."

The U.S. policy of cultivating Hussein as a moderate and reasonable Arab leader continued right up until he invaded Kuwait in August 1990, documents show. When the then-U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, April Glaspie, met with Hussein on July 25, 1990, a week before the Iraqi attack on Kuwait, she assured him that Bush "wanted better and deeper relations," according to an Iraqi transcript of the conversation. "President Bush is an intelligent man," the ambassador told Hussein, referring to the father of the current president. "He is not going to declare an economic war against Iraq."

"Everybody was wrong in their assessment of Saddam," said Joe Wilson, Glaspie's former deputy at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and the last U.S. official to meet with Hussein. "Everybody in the Arab world told us that the best way to deal with Saddam was to develop a set of economic and commercial relationships that would have the effect of moderating his behavior. History will demonstrate that this was a miscalculation."

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