

The Iraqi Precipice

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The current United States policy on Iraq can be traced to the Gulf War, caused by Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait in August 1990, and the events of September 11, which destroyed the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon. The latter has been blamed on the decentralised Al Qaeda organisation, led by Saudi national, Usama bin Laden.

Gulf War and its aftermath

As a consequence of the invasion, the United Nations Security Council, (UNSC), passed several Resolutions, UNSCR 660 (1990) called for 'full withdrawal', 661 (1990) imposed a trade embargo and economic sanctions and 678 (1990), authorised the states cooperating with Kuwait to use 'all necessary means to uphold Resolution 660'. The United States, supported by both Arab and non-Arab countries, including Australia, launched 'Operation Desert Storm' in January 1991, ending with the liberation of Kuwait on 27 February. The allied forces, since they were not authorised, did not proceed into Iraq. UNSCR 687 (1991) also required Iraq to destroy its weapons of mass destruction(WMD) under UN Supervision. UN inspectors withdrew in 1998 citing lack of co-operation by Iraq, following Iraq's expulsion of US members in the UN team, who were accused by Iraq of spying.

UN economic sanctions against Iraq also had a serious effect upon the economies of Turkey and Jordan and have been criticised on humanitarian grounds. These were partially lifted by several UNSCRs e.g. 712 in 1991 and 986 in April 1995, allowing Iraq to sell oil to buy food and medicine, the 'oil for food programme'.

Apart from the lack of UN authorisation, the general concern in 1991 was that Iraq, without Saddam Hussein, would fracture, leading to instability in the region. Iraq divided into three parts, the Kurds in the north, the Marsh Arabs(sixty per cent of the Iraqi population) who are Shia Muslims, a minor sect of Islam, in the south and the Sunni Muslims in the middle. The Kurds, as the result of imperial rivalry and treaties, between France and Britain, are concentrated at the confluence of four states, Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, and have been fighting for their own state of 'Kurdistan'.

Since 1979 Saddam Hussein, as President, Head of the ruling Baath Party and a Sunni, has ruled the country, through his family and the *a-Bu Nasir* tribe from the Tikrit region in the north-west, with an iron fist. During the indecisive Iran-Iraq War 1980-88, over disputed borders, in spite of Iraq's use of chemical weapons, the US actively supported Saddam to prevent Iraq's defeat (*Seattle Times*, 18 August 2002). The context was that US ally, the Shah of Iran, was overthrown in 1979 by the Ayatollah

Khomeini, resulting in the (Shia) Islamic Republic of Iran and the subsequent 440 days confinement of US hostages by Iran. The US feared the effects of Iraq's defeat on allies such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Saddam has survived many attempts on his life and has shown no mercy to his enemies, which have included close relatives. Poison gas was also used against the Kurds in Halabjah in 1988 and Congressional moves to sanction Iraq were blocked by President Reagan. The Iraqi Opposition, consisting of various Kurdish and Shia groups, self-declared democrats, liberals, exiled military officers and communists, has been suppressed internally, and externally are divided, ineffective and in some cases, infiltrated by Iraqi agents. Some of these have been supported, off and on, by the US and under its sponsorship, met in August and September 2002 to formulate a common policy.

Following the end of the Gulf War, in March and April 1991, Saddam suppressed internal revolts by the divided Iraqi Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. The US initially supported the Kurds but later abandoned them to Saddam's forces. The Marsh Arabs are seen to be potential allies of their co-religionists in Iran and action against them included draining of the Marshes. In April, the UN approved a 'no-fly' zone, above the 36th parallel, to protect the Kurds in northern Iraq and in August a 'no-fly' zone for Iraqi planes was established in the South. In 1996, this was extended to the 33rd parallel, just south of Baghdad. The zones, covering 62 per cent of Iraq are patrolled by the US and Britain.

Since 1991, US military operations and build-ups in the Gulf region have cost approximately US\$13 billion. Sporadic US actions include attacking an Iraqi intelligence centre near Baghdad in June 1993, in retaliation for an attempted assassination of President Bush during a visit to Kuwait in April and, following the expulsion of UN Inspectors, 'Operation Desert Fox' during which military and other centres were attacked. Since 1997 the US has advocated the replacement of Saddam but has not acted on this policy. His survival is thus seen as the 'unfinished business' left by then President Bush to his son. Until September 11, the US had implemented a policy, working largely through UNSC resolutions, of containment via air and naval operations. The most recent action was on the 15 September 2002 when British and US jets bombed targets in southern Iraq (*Washington Post*, 16 September).

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September 11 and After

September 11 resulted in President Bush declaring a 'War on Terrorism' and though aimed primarily at those responsible for the attack i.e. Al Qaeda, the War is open ended and has extended to other issues. Bush stressed that the War is not aimed at Muslims or Islam though Usama bin Laden has used Islam as a rallying point. There has however been a backlash experienced by some Muslim communities. Apart from military and other actions, the US has yet to deal with the issues and grievances, that have given rise to 'militant Islamic' and other terrorist groups, some of which have been the result of US foreign policy.

The War received widespread international support and co-operation, including from Russia with its unresolved Chechen conflict, and intelligence co-operation with China and India. The US-led action in Afghanistan is aimed primarily at destroying the bases of Al Qaeda, provided by the then Pakistan supported Taliban Government. Though successful in replacing the Taliban, the new government headed by President Hamid Kazai still faces enormous security and other challenges. It is not known if Usama has been killed, but his supporters have since been blamed for acts committed both in and outside Afghanistan.

The US has also supported or renewed relations with governments in oil and gas rich Central Asia. These include establishing military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (elements of the Royal Australian Air Force are in the Manas Airbase in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan) and limited landing rights in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In South Asia, Pakistan, having abandoned the Taliban, is now the front line ally in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and for the first time the US conducted joint military exercises with India. In Southeast Asia the US has renewed some aid ties with the Indonesian military and has sent 600 troops and advisers to the Southern Philippines aimed at the Muslim-based Abu Sayyaf, responsible for the murder of one of its citizens, as well as strengthening ties with Malaysia. There are expressed fears that the US will repeat practices used in the Cold War in supporting states, which have abused Human Rights but which publicly support the US on 'terrorism'. Within the US, some legislation, while popular with the majority of citizens, has alarmed civil liberties groups.

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'Axis of Evil' and 'regime change' in Iraq

The US focus on Iraq, which with Iran and North Korea was termed by Bush in his State of the Union address, as an 'Axis of Evil', is an extension of the War on Terrorism. These regimes with WMD have been accused of supporting US perceived 'terrorist groups' and the US fears that they could supply them to terrorists. In contrast to its policy on Iraq, the active policy of the US towards Iran and North Korea are different. With Iran there is a 'dual-track' policy, while condemning Iranian support for Palestinian groups, which Iran justifies as legitimate against Israeli occupation, there is dialogue between officials under the umbrella of the UN in Afghanistan. Iran has accused the US of 'taking advantage of the September 11 events to impose its illogical views on other countries' (*Washington Times*, 22 May 2002). The US, according to Iran Supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei aims ultimately to control the entire Middle East and 'to capture all vital resources in this part of the world' (*Reuters News*, 15 September 2002). In the case of North Korea, which is equally if not more brutal than Saddam's regime, and possesses nuclear capacity and delivery systems, the US has actively sought to negotiate with that regime on its nuclear capacity in the recent past. The US has told Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi, prior to his visit that country during September 2002, that it is prepared to resume talks.

Saddam is generally recognised to be a brutal dictator. However, the fact remains that Iraq has been contained by existing US policy and there is, as yet, no published evidence, despite allegations, of any link between Al Qaeda and Saddam. Usama bin Laden has condemned Saddam as an 'apostate', according to a policy brief by the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. The Ansar al-Islam, a group similar to and admiring of Al Qaeda, is currently operating in northern Iraq and is fighting against local Kurds. Allegations have been made that this group has links with Saddam. The British Foreign Minister, Jack Straw, has claimed that it will provide proof that Saddam has trained Al Qaeda operatives.

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Iraqi Weapons

UN inspectors had destroyed most, but not all, of Iraq's stock of, and capacity to produce WMD before they left in 1998. Given a lack of credible intelligence, it has been alleged by the US, Britain and Australia that Saddam has continued to develop them in secret. His refusal, until 17 September 2002, to accept inspections, is seen as evidence. While Iraq's interest in WMD is well known, whether it has actual stock is at best, a 'guesstimate'. The British *International Institute of Strategic Studies* Dossier (9 September 2002) states that Iraq probably has chemical and biological weapons. On

nuclear weapons, it said that Iraq does not have the facilities to produce nuclear weapons without extensive foreign assistance over several years, to produce fissile materials. Iraq 'could, however, assemble nuclear weapons within months if fissile material from foreign sources were obtained'. Apart from developing and possessing such a weapon, Iraq does not have the capacity to produce long-range missiles. It is thought to possess an estimated 12 al-Hussein missiles, with a range of 650 kms and if armed with chemical or biological weapons these could reach cities in five neighbouring countries. The UNSCR has limited Iraq to possess weapons with a range of not more than 150 kms. While dangerous, these do not pose an imminent danger to the US.

The US also claimed that Saddam could supply WMD to terrorists. This has been disputed by Richard Butler, former head of UN weapons inspection, during congressional hearings on Iraq. He noted that this would be irrational for Saddam and claimed that renewed inspections could prevent holdings of significant arsenals of them.

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The US Rationale for Action

Observers and analysts have provided several explanations for the US singling out Iraq for action.

- Saddam provides a real target, unlike the frustrating campaign against the shadowy and decentralised Al Qaeda and as noted above, the US has 'unfinished business' with him.
- The risk of keeping Saddam in a box and developing nuclear weapons is too high.
- Bush and his supporters have argued that by replacing Saddam and establishing democracy, this could deter other regimes' support for anti-US groups and also act as a catalyst for democratic change in the other Arab states.
- US relations with Saudi Arabia, the major world supplier of oil, since September 11, have been strained and should relations deteriorate further or there be a change in regime, control of Iraqi oil reserves, the second largest in the world, is seen by some analysts as being crucial. While the US, the major consumer of oil in the world, has decreased its dependence on oil through efficiencies since the Gulf War, it has recently increased its strategic reserves and is exploring sources from former Soviet countries in Central Asia.

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International Reactions

International support for 'regime change' in Iraq, unlike the 'War on Terrorism', has not yet been forthcoming. The Bush claim to 'the right of pre-emptive strike' has alarmed many countries since it will, contrary to international law, establish a dangerous precedent for other countries such as India in its conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir.

Any unilateral action on Iraq by the US raises questions of its inconsistent policy towards several countries, which already possess nuclear weapons and have threatened regional security. Others have also defied UN Security Council Resolutions with impunity e.g. Israel. On the need for 'regime change' in Iraq and establishing democracy, US allies, such as Saudi Arabia which has been seen by a US analyst as 'the kernel of evil' (and from where 15 of the 19 involved in September 11 come from) and Egypt, among others, are not democratic. There is no provision under international law for any state to determine, by force, the leadership of another country. As noted above, current policy has stymied Saddam's potential for action.

- Europeans, bar the United Kingdom, have largely opposed the policy because of the lack of evidence linking Saddam to September 11, failure to exhaust all diplomatic measures and the legality of the proposed action under international law. Generally they have urged the US against unilateral action and to seek the sanction of the UN to legitimise its action.
- British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Bush's strongest supporter, is facing strong domestic opposition and has, like Australia, now urged the UN to sanction proposed US action.
- ASEAN Parliamentarians, meeting in Hanoi currently have expressed alarm at the prospect of 'any unprovoked and unjustified' attack on Iraq.
- The Arab League in its Beirut March Summit, announced its "categorical rejection" of US policy. During his March visit to the Middle East US Vice-President Cheney was urged by Arab leaders to deal with the more important Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They expressed fears of regional instability as a consequence of such an attack and, perhaps unsaid, of triggering unrest, which could well threaten the security of friendly regimes.
- Egypt has undertaken to exert pressure on Iraq.
- Some Arab leaders may privately agree, but could not publicly support the US unilateral policy on Iraq without UN support. Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, in an interview with CNN on the 14 September 2002, said:

that his country would be willing to allow its territory and facilities to be used for military action against Iraq -- but only if such action is backed by a UN Security Council resolution.

- In the region, only Israel supports a pre-emptive strike by the US.

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A Shifting US Position?

The Bush Administration believes that, based on existing UN Security Council and Congressional Resolutions it does have a legal basis for its proposed action on Iraq. However, given widespread criticisms, and while still prepared to act unilaterally, Bush has personally lobbied key leaders for support, or at least not to cast their veto against, a yet to be made public UNSCR, for authorisation to act against Iraq. It is likely that such a resolution will require Saddam to accept, within a very short time-frame, unfettered and if necessary, armed inspections by the UN and the disarming of his WMD. Iraq has belatedly hinted since 1 August 2002, that it is prepared to consider readmitting inspectors under existing UNSC resolutions but these vague responses have been dismissed as delaying tactics by the US. On 3 September 2002 Tariq Aziz, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister, said acceptance of UN inspectors would be conditional on no US military action and the lifting of UN sanctions. The US has made it quite clear that re-acceptance of inspectors will not detract from their 'regime change' policy and Bush has said that 'the status quo is totally unacceptable' (*Radio address to the Nation*, 14 September 2002). The US is concerned that any protracted arguments by Iraq will affect the timing of its operation, which is likely to be after the Muslim fasting month in early December and the cooler season. There have been noted increases in US troop and equipment movements for 'military exercises' in the region.

In his UN speech on 12 September 2002 Bush has widened the target of terrorist groups and regimes who 'are plotting their war against civilisation' and stated that the US 'will work on a new resolution to meet our common enemy'. Some interpretations of his speech suggest a new willingness to exhaust UN options before taking direct action. His speech focused on Saddam who is seen to constitute a real danger to the US, his neighbours and the world, in its continual defiance of 16 UN Security Council

Resolutions, possession and uses of WMD. According to Bush, Saddam 'has made the case against himself' and urged the UN to fulfil its primary objective by supporting US action.

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US Debate on Iraq

There are ideological divisions, from the 'realists' to 'idealists', within the US Administration and Congress over 'regime change' in Iraq. Senior officials, without military experience (widely referred to as 'chicken hawks'), such as Vice-President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Congressional leaders, advocate the -- unilateral if needs be-- exercise of US power to change the status quo to the image of the US. Rumsfeld was instrumental in re-establishing relations with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war and was aware then, but remained silent, on Iraq's use of chemical weapons. To them Iraq provides a timely opportunity for the US to change the whole nature of the Middle East. They warned that to delay action against Saddam and provide for him to develop nuclear capacity is too dangerous and risky not only for the US but also for the region. Some advocates for tough action, including Attorney General Ashcroft, have been linked to the conservative Christian Right in American politics.

The more cautious, such as Colin Powell, Secretary of State, are concerned with the wider and long term repercussions. The supporters for caution cut across party lines, and include many experienced former senior officials (Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, James Baker and Lawrence Eagleburger) of the Bush Senior and Clinton Administrations and Congress members. Democrat Senator Dianne Feinstein has warned that unilateral action by the US:

without support from our allies or the UN would clearly identify the US as the aggressor and may well prompt a series of potentially catastrophic actions.

Following these expressed concerns, Bush has announced that he will seek the approval of Congress before he acts.

Concern has also been expressed by retired senior military officers (*The Age*, 31 August 2002) both in the US and from several countries. These include Australian Maj-Gen Alan Stretton, British Gen Sir Michael Rose and Field Marshall Lord Bramall, with the lack of comprehensive planning for the consequences of a war on Iraq. It has been noted that unlike the Gulf War, Saddam will, apart from responding with his WMD, concentrate his key troops in the major cities. Casualties, both civilian and military, will be much higher. As in the case of the Gulf War, Saddam will attack Israel with missiles, but this time armed with WMD, so as to link his survival with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given the widespread empathy for the Palestinian cause in the Arab and Muslim world, this could trigger intense antipathy towards not only the US but also their own pro-US governments. It could result in more repressive acts by moderate governments such as Egypt and Jordan and spawn new groups, which the 'War on Terrorism' is seeking to eliminate.

The continual leakage, deliberate or otherwise, of discussions and decisions relating to Iraq to the media has been unprecedented, and it is unclear whether these have been the result of internal divisions in the US Administration or a deliberate strategy to confuse Saddam. British military officials (*The Age*, 31 August 2002), suspect it is part of an information warfare campaign. On balance, it would appear that those advocating action, with or without UN support, have been more vocal. At the same time there has been a decline in US public support, with a majority, 56 per cent, feeling that it was

important to give the UN more time to try and secure the return of weapons inspectors (*Independent*, 9 September 2002). US Gulf War Veterans have also not supported military action in Iraq. This could well change if action commences.

The cost of an Iraqi campaign has been estimated, by those who advocate caution, to be \$US80 billion. The Gulf War cost US\$60 billion and US allies paid 80 per cent of this. During that War, oil reached US\$40 a barrel and affected the economies of non-oil producing countries and led to a worldwide recession.

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Australian Reactions

Australia supported the US during the Gulf War and has contributed naval elements to the enforcement of UN sanctions in the Gulf since 1991. Initial reactions by Prime Minister John Howard, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Defence Minister Senator Robert Hill, to September 11 and the 'War on Terrorism' have been strong and positive, though some remarks of Downer have been criticised by the Opposition and some of the media. Attorney General Daryl Williams has also acknowledged the possibility of a terrorist threat to Australia. While strong support appears to remain, the way views have been expressed has been modified after public opinion polls reveal the absence of strong support. Both sides of Parliament now stress the need for the US to seek UN support, though depending on the circumstances, will still be prepared to support unilateral US action. The Returned Services League issued a statement on the 3 September 2002:

that Australia would be morally justified in committing troops to assist a US ground invasion of Iraq if certain conditions are met - yet it fervently hopes that military action can be avoided...Clearly, it would be preferable if a diplomatic solution was found particularly one which saw the departure of Saddam Hussein and his cohorts.

The Australian High Commission in Singapore has featured in captured Al Qaeda tapes and the Singapore government have detained 21 people under its Internal Security Act. So far no Australian interests have been attacked although 10 Australians were among those killed in the World Trade Centre attack.

Australia's trade with Iraq is dominated by wheat valued at A\$829 million and with the Middle East at A\$7.89 billion (2001). Iraq had threatened, but later rescinded, to link its purchase of wheat to Australia's position on US policy.

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Update - 17 September 2002

The UN Secretary-General announced that Iraq has written in a letter to the UN, which stated that the Iraqi Government has decided:

to allow the return of the United Nations weapons inspectors to Iraq without conditions.

The White House, in response, stated that the UNSC needs to decide how to enforce its own resolutions, which:

will require a new, effective UN Security Council resolution that will actually deal with the threat Saddam Hussein poses to the Iraqi people, to the region and to the world.

It added that:

This is not a matter of inspections. It is about disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and the Iraqi regime's compliance with all other Security Council resolutions.

Reaction around the world ranged from cautious acceptance by the European and Arab countries to deep suspicion that Iraq is merely playing for time and is seen by the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, as a 'diplomatic ploy'. Former South African president Nelson Mandela has accused the US of bullying Saddam, in dismissing Iraq's agreement to the unconditional return of UN arms inspectors.

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Update - 20 December 2002

On 8 November 2002 the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 1441, while Iraq indicated its willingness to accept UN inspectors, without conditions, on the 17 September 2002. It took some 2 months of negotiations among the permanent members of the Security Council, before they were satisfied, that the wording of the proposed resolution did not include any 'hidden 'triggers,' that would have allowed the US to commence military operations against Iraq, without requiring a further resolution from the Council.

The agreed Resolution noted that Iraq was in material breach of past UNSC Resolutions and offered Iraq a final opportunity to comply with the relevant resolutions, on pains of 'serious consequences'. It required Iraq to provide within 30 days a full, accurate and complete declaration of all aspects of its weapons of mass destruction programs. The weapons inspectors were to be provided with immediate, unimpeded, unconditional and unrestricted access and the right to interview all Iraqi officials involved in any of the programs either in Iraq or outside the country (and their families). Failure to meet these stringent demands would be seen as a material breach and reported 'immediately' by the Inspectors to the Council, which would then convene immediately to consider the report. UN Inspectors began work within 45 days of the passing of the Resolution and will update the Council in 60 days after resuming inspections.

The UNSC gave Iraq 1 week to respond to the Resolution, which it did. Iraq has also provided a dossier of almost 12,000 pages as its 'Currently Accurate, Full and Complete Declaration (CAFCD)'. The United States and the United Kingdom have reacted sceptically and have stated that much of the information provided is not new. Secretary Powell (19 December 2002) has claimed that there were 'omissions' as well as 'obvious falsehoods' in the information provided.

The US has also continued to link Iraq with Al Qaeda but according to the BBC (28 October 2002), 'the links are tenuous'. At the same time, US demand for 'regime change' in Iraq has been modified to accommodate either a 'change by the regime' or a 'change of the regime', implying that Saddam Hussein may yet survive if he complies completely with UNSCR 1441.

The US has continued to build up its forces in the region and has sought the support of allies (4 December 2002) with varying degrees of success. It is expected that military action, despite many uncertainties, may commence in March 2003, if not earlier, after the submission of the Final Report of the UN Inspectors, due on 27 February 2003.

At the behest of the US, the Iraqi opposition in exile, despite differences, has recently met in London (15-16 December 2002) and agreed to form a committee of 65 notables to shape the future of post Saddam Iraq. Despite these actions, Powell stated on 19 December 2002, that the US will stay 'within the UN process'.

Australia, while still supporting any potential US unilateral action on Iraq, would prefer to operate within the auspices of the UN. While contingency plans are being prepared, no commitment, particularly after the Bali Bombing in October, has been made to the US.

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