From the time Saddam Hussein came to political prominence in the late 1960s, the United States was never far from his mind. Washington was the most influential foreign power in the Middle East during the postwar period, and its policies helped shape the geopolitical context within which rulers like Saddam operated. Accordingly, Saddam placed special emphasis on evaluating U.S. intentions toward Iraq and the region—a task at which the Iraqi dictator believed himself to be particularly skilled. “America is a complicated country,” he told advisers. “Understanding it requires a politician’s alertness that is beyond the intelligence community... I said I don’t want either intelligence organization to give me analysis—that is my specialty.”

Until recently, the paucity of internal, primary-source documentation on Saddam’s regime forced scholars to resort to a sort of Kremlinology to divine the strategic calculus that drove his decision making. This is beginning to change. With the toppling of the Baathist regime in 2003, U.S. and coalition forces recovered millions of pages of Iraqi state records from various ministries and government offices. These records document the activities of the Republican Guard, the intelligence agencies, the Presidential Diwan, and other offices. They include everything from routine administrative correspondence to tapes and transcripts of meetings between Saddam and his top advisers. While gaps in coverage remain, the captured records shed considerable light on Iraqi decision making and national security policy under Saddam. The Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC), a new research center at the

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National Defense University, has begun to make these records available to scholars.  

In this article, we use captured records to examine Saddam Hussein’s strategic view of the United States, focusing on the period between his rise to power in the late 1960s and 1970s through the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. The purpose is not to provide a comprehensive history of U.S.-Iraqi affairs under Saddam, but rather to sketch the broad outlines of his strategic calculus vis-à-vis the United States and thereby offer insights into several key questions regarding that relationship. How did Saddam perceive the United States and its policies in the Middle East? What ideological, personal, and geopolitical influences shaped his view? How did he interpret U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s? What impact did his perceptions of the United States have on the decision to invade Kuwait? These questions—particularly the last two—have long been at the center of the scholarly literature on Saddam’s relationship with the United States, making it all the more important to reconsider them in light of the captured records.

What is remarkable about Saddam’s view of the United States is how consistently and virulently hostile it was. From early on, Saddam believed that the United States was unalterably opposed to his Baathist project and that efforts to marginalize and weaken Iraq were at the center of U.S. policy in the region. These sentiments were rooted in Baathist ideology and the key personality traits that shaped (and frequently distorted) Saddam’s worldview, and they were strongly reinforced by Washington’s support for Israel and U.S. involvement with Kurdish rebels in the 1970s. To be sure, this apprehension did not prevent Saddam from doing business with Washington when his interests dictated, as U.S.-Iraqi cooperation during the 1980s clearly demonstrated. Yet tacit U.S. support for Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war did little to ameliorate Saddam’s underlying fears, and revelations that the United States had provided arms and intelligence to Tehran in 1985–86 only heightened his concerns. “The Americans,” he remarked, “are still conspiring bastards.” By the late 1980s and 1990, Saddam worried that

2. In drafting this article, the authors accessed the Iraqi records through an electronic database maintained by the Department of Defense. Since then, most of these records have become available at the CRRC. A few of the records have not yet been processed into CRRC collections but soon will be. In this article, we cite records currently located (as of December 2011) at the CRRC by CRRC number, title, and, date (where available). Records that are not yet part of CRRC collections are cited as “Captured Record,” followed by title and date. For examples of previous studies that use the Iraqi records, see Kevin M. Woods, The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein’s Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War (Annapolis, MD:, 2008); Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki, and Mark E. Stout, A Survey of Saddam’s Audio Files, 1978–2001: Toward an Understanding of Authoritarian Regimes (Alexandria, VA, 2010); Hal Brands and David Palkki, “Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?” International Security 36 (Summer 2011): 133–36. Cambridge University Press will soon publish a revised version of Woods, Palkki, and Stout’s study under the title The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant’s Regime, 1978–2001.

American operatives were trying to assassinate him, and he saw the United States (and its ally, Israel) as the primary foreign dangers to his regime. In sum, Saddam always viewed the United States through a lens of suspicion and hostility; what changed, in his mind, was the severity and immediacy of the threat.

This view of U.S. policy, in turn, seems to have had an important influence on Saddam’s decision to invade Kuwait. Many scholars have argued that by supporting Saddam during the 1980s, Washington encouraged him to think he could get away with swallowing up his smaller, weaker neighbor in 1990. Our findings point in the opposite direction. Saddam was not tempted by an expectation of American forbearance in 1989–90. Rather, he was haunted by the specter of a U.S.-Israeli-Kuwaiti conspiracy to strangle Iraq and topple his regime. When U.S. officials sought to engage Saddam during this period, he viewed their efforts as subterfuge; when they signaled Washington’s interest in Kuwait security, he interpreted these actions as confirmation of his fears.

It is likely that a variety of factors—some strategic, some economic, some personal—played into the invasion of Kuwait. Moreover, Saddam’s compartmentalized style of decision making makes it difficult, even with the captured documents, to disaggregate these various influences and establish the precise rationale that informed his choice. Yet Saddam’s escalating apprehensions regarding the United States and its allies, and his belief that many of Iraq’s troubles could be traced back to Washington, were central to his strategic outlook in early 1990 and seem to have pushed him toward increasingly risky and aggressive behavior. While the evidence is only suggestive on this point, the captured records strongly hint that Saddam saw the invasion as an advantageous stroke in what he perceived to be an intensifying and potentially mortal confrontation with the United States.

**Ideology, Geopolitics, and Saddam’s Early View of the United States**

Saddam Hussein’s early perceptions of the United States were forged from the distinctive characteristics of his worldview and the geopolitical logic of

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Middle Eastern affairs. Born in Tikrit in 1937, Saddam had an unhappy childhood and led a troubled existence until he joined the Baath party in the late 1950s. His subsequent time as a Baathist thug gave him a sense of purpose and positioned him for a rise to power following the Baathist coup in 1968. A cousin of President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, Saddam became deputy chairman of the ruling Revolutionary Command Council and head of the security services. He used these positions to crush resistance to the Baathist regime, and also to accumulate personal influence and gradually displace Bakr as the most powerful man in the country. Saddam would ultimately seize the presidency in July 1979, going on to erect a regime that was as personalistic as it was violent and authoritarian. As internal regime memos reminded the dictator’s subordinates, “Iraq is Saddam Hussein and if Saddam says something, Iraq says something.”

From the time Saddam began his rise to prominence in the late 1960s, his worldview blended a grandiose self-image with an unshakable sense of insecurity. Saddam’s “strategic vision” revolved around the idea that he was a transcendent world figure: the modern-day Nasser or Saladin who would claim leadership of the “Arab Nation,” confront Israel, and restore the Arab world to its former greatness. “There is no escape from the responsibility of leadership,” he would tell his inner circle in 1981. “It is not our choice to accept it or not. It is rather, imposed on us... Iraq can make this nation [the Arab world] rise and can be its center post of its big abode. There are smaller posts, but it must always be Iraq that feels the responsibility, and feels it is the central support post of the Arab nation. If Iraq falls, then the entire Arab Nation will fall. When the central post breaks, the whole house will collapse.” As recent scholarship has underscored, this sense of destiny often played a key role in Saddam’s decision making, and it acted as a sort of prism through which he saw the world.

With great ambition, however, came great peril. Saddam believed that he was under constant menace from a variety of conspirators—Iraqi dissidents, rival Arab governments, Western imperialists, Israelis and Jews, and others—who were working to undermine his government and thwart his aspirations. As one


scholar notes, “conspiracy theories big and small . . . were seemingly at the heart of Iraq’s strategic decision-making process.”

This virtual obsession with conspiracies had deep roots. As Jerrold Post and Amatzia Baram observe, Saddam’s childhood was marred by parental abandonment as well as psychological and physical abuse, leaving him extremely distrustful. As a young adult, Saddam was thrust into the cut-throat world of Iraqi politics, where violence and conspiracy were prerequisites not just for advancement, but for survival as well. Saddam learned this lesson early on; he participated in an assassination attempt against Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Qasim when he was only twenty-two years old, and he eventually gained absolute power by sideling or eliminating colleagues, friends, and even his former patron and mentor, Bakr. These formative political experiences cast a long shadow over Saddam’s statecraft, as the Iraqi leader never forgot that his own methods might someday be turned against him. “I know that there are scores of people plotting to kill me,” he told a confidant in 1979, “and this is not difficult to understand. After all, did we not seize power by plotting against our predecessors?”

As a British diplomat once described Josef Stalin, Saddam’s worldview thus reflected a “curious mix of shrewdness and nonsense.” Saddam was an astute tactician who outmaneuvered his rivals for power and dominated Iraq for decades. He was also a brutal, delusional tyrant whose perceptions were fundamentally distorted by Baathist ideology, the sycophany and nepotism that characterized the regime, and not least his own parochialism, paranoia, narcissism, anti-Semitism, and megalomania. Saddam always saw himself as a righteous leader beset by malignant plotters, a view he maintained even as he erected a ruthlessly repressive regime and launched repeated bids for regional hegemony. In effect, he displayed a grossly exaggerated version of the fundamental attribution error. If he transgressed another, it was because situational imperatives left him no choice. If another person or country came into conflict with Saddam, it was because they harbored malevolent intent.

If there was little in Saddam’s worldview to encourage introspection, nor was there much to predispose him to a positive view of the United States. When Saddam was a boy, his uncle Khairallah told him stories that glorified Arab nationalism and castigated foreign and Western influence. Likewise, the political system in which Saddam matured—Baathism—was predicated on continual conflict with malicious influences like Zionism and imperialism. In Baathist ideology, the United States was the legatee to European imperialism, the next in a long line of powers that had sought to control the Middle East by dividing and

11. The British diplomat is quoted in Woods, *Mother of All Battles*, 307. On these issues, see also Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, passim; Bengio, *Saddam’s Word*, passim; Post and Baram, *Saddam is Iraq, Iraq is Saddam*, passim.
subjugating its inhabitants.” As one regime spokesman put it in 1974, “The United States has been the author of all the designs for controlling our homeland.” Conflict between the United States and the Baathists was therefore the inevitable result of the former’s imperial designs and the latter’s determination to lead the Arab world to independence and dignity. “Colonialism cannot cooperate with us,” a young Saddam argued in 1971, “because we are keen on our Arabism.”

This ideological animus exerted a strong pull on Saddam’s early views of the United States. Saddam harbored what Ofra Bengio calls a “nightmare of three circles of hostility,” a fear that the United States would seek to protect its privileges in the Middle East by joining Israel and Iran in an anti-Iraq axis. Saddam frequently alleged that Washington was conspiring with the Shah of Iran to keep Iraq weak and that the Western powers had created Israel as a way of dividing and humiliating the Arabs. He suspected the United States of partnering with reactionary Arab regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and elsewhere to control Middle Eastern oil and defeat the Pan-Arab movement of which he saw himself as leader. For Saddam, the United States was the most powerful of the enemies trying to bring about the “psychological collapse” of the Baathist project and the broader Arab nation. “U.S. imperialism has been trying for years to control the area,” he charged in 1980.

As these allegations indicate, Saddam had a complex definition of threat. In some cases, he spoke of direct physical threats in the form of assassination plots and military strikes. In others, the perceived threat consisted of nebulous political or economic intrigues, invariably with Zionist and colonial roots, aimed at keeping the Arabs weak and leaderless. Saddam frequently spoke of a variety of threats and conspiracies within a single conversation, referring to menacing actors (usually Israel, America, Jews, Zionists, Persians, Iraqi dissidents, or a combination of the above) as “they” rather than providing names. “The enemies of the Arab nation are placing obstacles in its way to prevent it from using its capabilities for struggle,” Saddam warned, ominously but vaguely, in 1979.

Saddam’s fears drew deeply on his ideological proclivities and personality traits. They were not entirely irrational, however, for the period of his political ascendancy furnished ample evidence of foreign encirclement. Although

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14. Quoted in Kuwait to State, October 20, 1971, box 3282, Subject Numeric Files, Record Group (RG) 59, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter NARA).
Saddam badly overestimated the degree to which the U.S. policy was explicitly meant to harm Iraq. Washington’s pursuit of regional stability during the early 1970s frequently came at Baghdad’s expense. As part of the “twin pillar” policy for maintaining regional equilibrium, limiting Soviet influence, and preserving ready access to oil following the British departure from the Middle East, the United States forged a close partnership with the Shah’s Iran, thereby giving superpower backing—and considerable military assistance—to Iraq’s traditional rival. This relationship antagonized the Iraqi government, whose propaganda outlets charged that the United States was “preparing this regime to play the role of policeman with the thick baton in the Arab Gulf area.”

The Baathist regime had an even more alarming brush with U.S. power between 1972 and 1975, when the Nixon and Ford administrations indirectly supported a Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq. The idea was to distract the vehemently anti-Israeli government from turning its full attention toward the Jewish state (and from late 1973 onward, from interfering in the Arab-Israeli disengagement process) and to bleed a regime that had signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1972. “We consider them Soviet clients and your enemies-in-arms,” Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told Saudi officials in 1974. The United States funneled money to the rebels, while officially denying such assistance. The Israelis and the Iranians joined the endeavor by offering training and, in Iran’s case, sanctuary and direct military support.

The operation came apart in early 1975, when the Shah abandoned the rebels and signed the Algiers accord with Iraq, but the incident nonetheless reinforced Saddam’s deep-seated sensitivity to U.S. conspiracies. He made little effort to conceal his anger, telling a visiting American delegation that “U.S. strategy in the region was a pincer movement involving Israel and Iran directed at destroying the Iraqi revolution.”

As this comment indicates, Washington’s support for Israel dovetailed with Saddam’s entrenched anti-Semitism to create a permanent lamina of hostility toward the United States. Saddam frequently lamented that the “Zionist

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22. In the mid-1990s, Saddam told his inner circle, “We should reflect on all that we were able to learn from The Protocols of the Elders of Zion... I do not believe that there was any
entify" had been “created by colonialism,” and by the 1970s he had come to view the United States as an obstacle to his dream of a decisive showdown with Israel. Following the Yom Kippur war of 1973, in which the United States provided extensive material assistance and diplomatic backing to Israel, Saddam blasted Washington for its “continued unconditional . . . support of the enemy.” Oil, he asserted during the subsequent Arab embargo, must be “the weapon that will definitely force America to stop supporting the enemy.” Similarly, U.S. support for the Egypt-Israel peace deal in 1978 underscored Saddam’s sense that the United States would not tolerate an assertive, pan-Arabist, anti-Israel government in Baghdad. “The goal,” he remarked, “was to make the whole Arab world bow down.” In this same conversation, Saddam fantasized about the climactic military showdown with Israel, in which “each meter of land . . . is bleeding with rivers of blood,” and predicted that this conflict would inevitably entail confrontation with the United States:

If we fight for 12 months in the Golan, and God willing the day will come when we fight, and when we overlook the Sea of Galilee we will hear the Americans threatening that if we don’t stop our advance, they will throw an atomic bomb at us. Then we can tell them, ‘Yes, thank you, we will stop. What do you want?’ ‘Stop and don’t move, not even one meter, otherwise we will throw an atomic bomb on you,’ they reply. We will state that we have stopped, but we have not given up. We will stay and watch from the Sea of Galilee to see if there is any change in circumstances that will make us go forward further.

This statement hints at Saddam’s pragmatism—Iraq would stop and bide its time when confronted by American threats—as well as his sense that U.S. policies in the region stood athwart the attainment of his own grand aspirations.

falsification with regard to those Zionist objectives, specifically with regard to the Zionist desire to usurp—usurping the economies of people.” Captured Record, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Baath Party Members,” undated.
26. Saddam also blamed Washington for the Israeli attack on the Osirak reactor in 1981. The Mossad could not have obtained the intelligence needed to mount the strike on its own, he alleged, meaning that “there must have been another international party cooperating with them.” CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-571, “President Saddam Hussein Attending a Meeting regarding the Israeli Attack,” undated (June 1981). This episode constitutes a classic case of Saddam’s conspiracy theories being half correct. The Reagan administration had not known of Israeli plans to strike the reactor, and State Department officials were displeased when the attack occurred. “The strike occurred at a moment when it could scarcely have been more damaging to our diplomatic efforts in the region,” concluded U.S. diplomats in Israel. Yet in planning the strike, Israeli officials had made use of satellite imagery provided—ostensibly for
By the time Saddam became the unchallenged ruler of Iraq in 1979, American policies had interacted with prominent aspects of his worldview to produce a deeply antagonistic outlook on the United States. This viewpoint did not preclude temporary accommodation when circumstance dictated, as events in the 1980s would show. Yet it did create a strong undercurrent of hostility in the relationship, and Saddam’s private comments frequently displayed an expectation of an eventual showdown with America. Iraq must have “an enormous and important role” in “weakening the influence of colonialism” in the Middle East, Saddam told advisers in 1978. Or as Hussein Kamil, the son-in-law who rose to great heights within the regime before his defection in 1995, would later put it, “Your Excellency knows that we were raised hating the Americans.”

The extent to which Saddam viewed Iraqi foreign relations through this prism was evident in his reaction to U.S. efforts to repair the bilateral relationship in the mid- and late-1970s. Following the Algiers accords, Henry Kissinger sought to reestablish contact with the Iraqi government in hopes of capitalizing upon frictions between Baghdad and Moscow and pulling the regime out of the Soviet camp. The Carter administration pursued much the same policy, offering to expand economic and cultural ties with Baghdad and, both directly and through a variety of intermediaries, to restore full diplomatic relations, which had been severed since the Six-Day War in 1967.

Saddam’s response to these overtures showed the mix of opportunism and hostility that would subsequently characterize his dealings with the United States. The Baathist regime pragmatically agreed to do business with American firms, and bilateral commerce increased considerably. Saddam even availed himself of American medical expertise in 1977, when he secretly asked U.S. officials to send a group of doctors to Baghdad to treat his recurring back ailment. (Carter agreed.) Yet Saddam ultimately refused to restore diplomatic relations with the United States, apparently due to American support for Israel and the Camp David accords. Even after the Iranian revolution of 1979 provided Washington and Baghdad with a common threat, he remained unmoved.

29. Memorandum for Brzezinski, April 25, 1977, NLC-10-2-3-1-4, JCL; “Meeting on Health Initiatives in Iraq,” May 24, 1977, Bourne Files, JCL.
In fact, Saddam interpreted the Iranian revolution and its fallout as further evidence of U.S. malfeasance. As one Iraqi general later recalled, while the revolution initially made Saddam “happy” since “the Shah was brought to power by the Americans and had tried to police the Gulf region,” his thinking quickly changed as the new Islamic regime fostered insurrection in Iraq and lambasted Baghdad’s secular rulers. By November 1979, the conspiracy theorist in Saddam had come to see an American hand in events in Tehran, despite the ongoing hostage crisis involving U.S. diplomats. The removal of the Shah, he explained, was “completely an American decision.” He expected Washington to use this event as a pretext for an operation meant to restore a more pro-U.S. regime in Iran: “We are talking about an American occupation.” Additionally, the United States would take the revolution as an excuse to send its naval forces into the Persian Gulf to harm Iraq. Washington had “[agreed] with the Iranians in scaring the people of the Gulf states” so it could “intervene in the Gulf region, arrange their position, and re-organize the Gulf region according to their established, laid out plan, which includes the role of the Iranian events.”

Saddam was thus predisposed to see Washington’s nefarious influence in even the most unlikely of scenarios. He clearly had what political psychologists call a “bad faith image” of the United States—a sense that Washington was unalterably duplicitous and that its policies had not only the effect but also the intention of harming Iraqi interests. This belief was somewhat understandable in light of Washington’s record of not-so-covert meddling in Iraq and the Middle East, but Saddam’s paranoia, narcissism, and other characteristics ensured that he took this viewpoint to the extreme. As his comments on the Iranian revolution indicate, Saddam was convinced that nearly any misfortune that befell Iraq could—however counterintuitively—be traced back to American machinations. Saddam gave pungent expression to his appraisal of American intentions in 1980, calling the United States “the arch-Satan.”

February 1, 1980; CRRC SH-SHTP-D-000-559, “Saddam and His Inner Circle Discussing Relations with Various Arab States, Russia, China, and the United States,” undated (circa November 1979); Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, January 15, 1979, Declassified Documents Reference System (hereafter DDRS).


INCREASED COOPERATION AND PERSISTENT HOSTILITY DURING THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

To the extent that there was a thaw in U.S.-Iraq relations during the 1980s, it came as a result of the Iran-Iraq war. Saddam’s decision to invade Iran in September 1980 was a product of both threat and opportunity. The regime in Tehran was inciting Persian Gulf Shiites to rebellion, calling for the overthrow of Saddam’s regime, and was suspected of complicity in an assassination attempt against Tariq Aziz, Iraq’s deputy prime minister. Yet Iran was also consumed by postrevolutionary turmoil, its military weakened by purges and ideological strife. In these circumstances, a military strike held out hope of fostering a counterrevolution and the emergence of a more moderate regime in Iran, retaking “Arab” land, and not least of all, advancing Saddam’s claim to regional leadership. In a meeting just prior to the invasion, this sense of opportunism was at the forefront of Saddam’s calculus. “What is stopping us from moving forward on all axes and surrounding their armies and imprisoning them?” he asked. “The result of our calculations is that we are able to reach the heartland of Iran.”

Within months, however, Iranian forces halted the Iraqi advance. By mid-1982, Tehran had reversed its initial territorial losses and turned the tables on Saddam by invading Iraq. The Iraqi military used airpower, high-tech weaponry acquired abroad, and chemical weapons to blunt Iranian human-wave offensives, but Saddam’s regime remained under constant pressure, and at times his position seemed close to collapse. In February 1986, Iranian forces overran the Fao peninsula in southeastern Iraq, restricting Iraqi access to the Persian Gulf, endangering Kuwait and southern Iraq, and raising the possibility that Iraqi defenses might give way. “The longer the war continues,” U.S. State Department official Richard Murphy predicted in mid-1986, “the greater the risk of an Iraqi defeat.”

This prospect was doubly alarming to policymakers in Washington. An Iraqi defeat would empower the vehemently anti-American government in Tehran, allowing it to dominate the Persian Gulf and the international oil market. Moreover, if Saddam grew desperate, he might seek greater military and economic support from Moscow, thereby allowing the Kremlin to expand its influence in the heart of the Gulf region. To forestall these dangers, the Reagan administration quietly began to support Saddam. Iraq came off the U.S. list of

36. Murphy quoted in Jentleson, With Friends Like These, 56.
state sponsors of terrorism in 1982, and full diplomatic relations were restored in late 1984. Between fiscal years 1983 and 1986, the Department of Agriculture guaranteed roughly $1.65 billion in Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) credits to banks that would lend Iraq money for the purchase of U.S. agricultural commodities. (Subsequent allotments in 1987 and 1988 brought the wartime total to roughly $3.5 billion.)

Iraq also received hundreds of millions of dollars in credits from the Export-Import Bank and was permitted to buy dual-use goods such as trucks, helicopters, and high-speed computers. U.S. officials only occasionally criticized Saddam’s frequent use of chemical weapons, and through an initiative known as Operation Staunch, Washington sought to obstruct Iran from acquiring new weapons or spare parts on the international arms market. Additionally, the Reagan administration provided Baghdad with military intelligence. The administration “would regard any major reversal of Iraq’s fortunes as a strategic defeat for the West,” U.S. officials wrote in preparation for a meeting in Baghdad in 1983.

Still, the scope and impact of U.S. assistance to Saddam was less than is generally assumed. U.S. officials had no illusions about the Baathist regime and made no secret that they hardly preferred Saddam to the ayatollahs. In a 1981 diary entry, Reagan labeled Saddam a “no good nut.” Several years later, an unnamed White House official was equally blunt in his assessment: “I don’t think it’s in anybody’s interest, any country in the world, to have either side win.”

U.S. technological and financial support was a pittance compared to what Saddam received from Europe and the Gulf, and U.S. officials refused to sell advanced American weaponry to Iraq. While the United States did sell Saddam trucks, helicopters, and other goods that were capable of being retrofitted for military purposes, in financial terms these sales constituted only 0.7 percent of Iraq’s wartime weapons imports. In constant (1990) prices, Iraq purchased eighty-seven times more arms from the Soviets, twenty-four times more from


43. The quotation is from “Talking Points for Amb. Rumsfeld’s Meeting with Tariq Aziz and Saddam Hussein,” December 14, 1983, EBB 82, NSA.

the Chinese, and twenty-two times more from the French than it did from the United States.45

U.S. intelligence and diplomatic support were more valuable to Iraq. Operation Staunch helped reduce the number of countries selling arms to Iran from forty to twenty, and the arms trade between Western Europe and Tehran fell from $1 billion in 1984 to $200 million in 1987.46 Similarly, the intelligence-sharing relationship gradually expanded from 1982 onward, with Washington providing Iraq not simply with order of battle information on Khomeini’s forces, but also with “specific targeting data” on logistical and economic targets within Iran. “Iraqi air has significantly reduced Iran’s oil exports,” one official wrote. “Iraq should be encouraged to sustain these economic attacks because they do degrade Iran’s offensive capabilities.”47

Even in these areas, however, the impact of U.S. assistance to Iraq should not be overstated. Operation Staunch never fully halted the provision of European weapons to Iran. Nor could it stop Tehran from purchasing arms from alternative suppliers like North Korea and China, which quickly moved to fill the void. Israel and Vietnam also helped sustain the Iranian war effort by providing spare parts for the U.S.-made weapons systems acquired by Tehran prior to the fall of the Shah. As Richard Fairbanks, the State Department official who oversaw Operation Staunch, admitted, the United States “could not hope to stop all Western arms from reaching Iran because the sources are diverse, widespread, and often beyond the reach of cooperating governments.”48

With respect to intelligence, the quality and specificity of the reporting provided to Iraq varied considerably, and U.S. assistance constituted only one

45. From 1980 to 1988, Iraq purchased a total of $29,534m of arms at constant (1990) prices. $17,528 million came from the Soviet Union, $4,905 million from China, $4,356 million from France, and $201 million from the United States. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s Arms Trade Database of Importer/Exporter Trend-Indicator Value (TIV) for Iraq, data obtained January 6, 2010 at http://armstrade.sipri.org. While the United States might have more vigilantly discouraged allies’ arms sales to Iraq, this likely would have had only a minimal impact on Iraqi arms acquisitions. Jordan, Egypt, France, and Italy and other states were highly motivated to arm Iraq as a means of averting an Iranian victory, with or without U.S. approval. See, for instance, David Styan, France & Iraq: Oil, Arms, and French Policy Making in the Middle East (Chicago, 2006); esp. 143–46; see also Jidda to State, May 22, 1984, box 91689, Near East and South Asia Affairs, National Security Council (NSC) Records, RRL.

46. Tarock, Superpowers’ Involvement, 94.


piece of a complex system of intelligence gathering and analysis. U.S.-provided intelligence was used to coordinate Iraqi defensive efforts during the worst days of the war and later to plan offensives against Iranian forces. Yet Iraq also relied heavily on its own signals intelligence (SIGINT) capability, made possible by the acquisition of Iranian-code breaking machines. Moreover, the Baathist government received extensive intelligence assistance from France and particularly the Soviet Union, the latter of which had by far the largest foreign intelligence presence in Baghdad during the war. The Soviets provided Iraqi analysts with information on the location of Iranian troop concentrations, headquarters, and supply depots, and assisted Baghdad in developing its SIGINT capacity. According to the General Military Intelligence Directorate’s (GMID) Major General Mizher al-Tarfa, data the CIA provided “was simple information, while the information we had was much more detailed . . . The KGB helped us decipher the Iranian codes . . . Our information was complete to start with; any information we received from the CIA was complementary.”

Desperate to preserve his regime, Saddam no longer had the luxury of spurning even half-hearted American overtures. Iraq was in no position to be selective in its friends, and for all the ambivalence and limits of Washington’s policies, U.S. assistance promised to help Baghdad avert diplomatic isolation and mitigate the disadvantages it faced in fighting a larger, stronger neighbor. Iraqi officials thus began to make overtures to their American counterparts as early as 1981. Saddam himself participated in the charm offensive, telling U.S. Congressman Steven Solarz that “Iraq is not pro-Soviet and does not hate America.” Over the next several years, Saddam lessened (usually) the public vitriol of his comments toward the United States, permitted unprecedented links between U.S. and Iraqi intelligence, and had subordinates seek greater American assistance for his war effort. As a 1987 study by the GMID noted, Washington had helped Iraq in numerous ways: “The Iraqis never quite

49. Wayne White, a senior State Department intelligence official, later asserted that the U.S. government “did not wish to be embarrassed by a possible Iranian attack in an area not specified in the reports, so these products typically suggested possible Iranian attacks in a host of sectors, rendering them of little practical military value.” Authors’ e-mail correspondence with Wayne White, May 26, 2010. During the mid-1980s, Saddam also remarked that the utility of U.S. intelligence varied considerably. See CRRC SH-SHTP-D-000-607, “Meeting with Armed Forces General Command,” July 31, 1986.


51. Saddam quoted in “Meeting of Congressman with Solarz with Saddam Husayn,” August 1982, CIA FOIA Reading Room, Washington, DC; also Eagleton to State, 28 May 28, 1981, NSA.

52. CRRC SH-GMID-D-000-265, “General Military Intelligence Directorate Study of the Iran-Iraq War,” May 12, 1987. See also the comments of Tariq Aziz in “Memorandum of
trusted us,” Ambassador David Newton later said, “but had some confidence in their ability to predict us.”

The thaw that occurred in U.S.-Iraq relations during the mid-1980s, however, was purely circumstantial and largely superficial. Saddam was well aware that the United States was helping him only out of geopolitical necessity, and numerous points of contention remained. Iraqi officials chafed at Reagan’s refusal to sell weapons to Iraq, his efforts to prevent third countries from transferring U.S.-made arms to Baghdad, and occasional American criticism of Iraqi chemical weapons use. “We are now being assailed by this medieval regime,” said Aziz on one occasion, “so don’t bother me with these questions about chemical weapons.”

Additionally, Iraqi officials interpreted the fact that Israel—which, in contrast to Washington, sought to cultivate Tehran as a counterweight to Saddam—was shipping arms to Iran as evidence of a U.S. plot to weaken the regime. Iraq “remains convinced that the United States is prolonging the war by allowing Israel to supply arms to Iran,” a U.S. Special National Intelligence Estimate prepared in July 1983 concluded. As Saddam would later tell his advisers, “Israel is an extension of the United States of America and the English.”

As Saddam’s comment indicates, he was willing to accept the United States as a temporary wartime ally but continued to see it as a longer-term strategic threat. The intensity of this feeling was evident even at the height of U.S.-Iraqi cooperation. In late 1984, just a month before resuming diplomatic relations with the United States, Saddam instructed his subordinates to warn Iraqi officers about American treachery. “We need the instructors to emphasize through training on how we are still affected by America, we are still burning due to their acts,” he explained.

Saddam’s opinion of the military intelligence provided by Washington amply demonstrates the limits of rapprochement. The Iraqi leader and his advisers worried that the United States was using its AWACS and satellite capabilities to spy on Iraq rather than Iran, and they attributed military setbacks to a covert

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55. SNIE 36.2-83, “Prospects for Iraq,” July 19, 1983, EBB 167, NSA. On Israeli support for Iran, see Fayazmanesh, *The United States and Iran*, 57–58.
57. CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-735, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Senior Officials,” October 18, 1984. It is not clear what “acts” Saddam was referencing.
U.S. intelligence partnership with Tehran. “All the battles that they won and achieved huge results, and have achieved victory over us,” said Vice President Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri 1986, “all these battles were the result of detailed information about us in the areas of attack.”

Saddam himself alleged that the United States was deliberately feeding Iraq faulty information. This perception only grew stronger after February 1986, when Saddam concluded that misleading U.S. intelligence helped produce the Iraqi defeat at Fao. For the remainder of the war, Saddam and his advisers explained this reversal as the result of Washington’s treachery and continued to suspect the United States of providing intelligence to Iran.

Overall, Washington’s record of tacit backing for Iraq between 1982 and 1986 did little to assuage Saddam’s suspicions. In a high-level meeting in July 1986, he acknowledged that the American position had been more beneficial to Iraq since 1982, but he nonetheless maintained that Washington harbored malign intentions in the Middle East. In Saddam’s eyes, the limits and ambivalence of U.S. support for Iraq, the perceived shortcomings in American-provided intelligence, and other lingering conflicts were all part of a plan to prolong the war, weaken Iraq, and thereby force the vulnerable Persian Gulf states into a greater reliance on the United States. “The Americans are determined to establish military bases through political agreements, if not military agreements compounded by political agreements in the Gulf region,” he said.

Even at the height of bilateral cooperation, Saddam’s animosity toward the United States remained intact.

**THIS STAB IN THE BACK: IRANGATE**

During the 1970s, a covert initiative involving the United States, Israel, and Iran had inflamed Iraqi sensitivities and lent credence to Saddam’s worst apprehensions. History repeated itself a decade later. While Reagan never wavered in his desire to avert an Iranian military triumph over Iraq, by mid-1985 his administration was contemplating an overture to Tehran. Reagan hoped that

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58. CRRC SH-SHTP-D-000-607, “Transcript of a Conversation between Saddam Hussein and High Ranking Officers during the Iran-Iraq War,” 1985–86; see also CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-813, “Saddam Hussein Attending Meeting with Baath Party Members about Military issues,” undated; CRRC SH-SHTP-D-000-846, “Transcription of Recording of Tapes Concerning Meetings of the Armed Forces General Command,” October 17, 1980. It is important to note that Saddam and Izzat made these accusations before it was revealed that the United States had, in fact, been providing arms and intelligence to Iran.


Iran might facilitate the release of U.S. hostages held in Lebanon; several of his advisers sought to check the potential growth of Soviet influence in Tehran and establish ties with Iranian leaders who might succeed the ailing Ayatollah Khomeini. The upshot was a scheme that included covert arms sales to Iran and left the United States supporting two countries at war with each other.

First using the Israelis as a conduit, and then independently, American operatives delivered some two thousand TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) antitank missiles, 18 HAWK anti-aircraft missiles, and several shipments of HAWK spare parts to Iran between mid-1985 and late 1986. Iran also received U.S. military intelligence, and Israel resumed weapons shipments to Tehran, including deliveries of spare parts for Iran’s fleet of F-4. While the precise impact of this assistance is difficult to trace, the Iranians may have derived some tactical benefit from U.S. policy. It was reported at the time and after that the TOW missiles and U.S. intelligence may have helped Iran seize and hold the Fao peninsula in 1986, and the HAWK spare parts were rumored to have allowed Iranian forces to mount a more effective defense of the Kharg Island oil terminal in the Gulf.

For Washington, by contrast, the arms sales were a debacle. The deliveries failed to strengthen U.S. influence in Iran or bring home the desired number of hostages, and they flew in the face of Reagan’s tacit wartime support for Iraq.Leaks to the press in November 1986 forced Reagan to disclose the weapons sales in a nationally televised address, and the ensuing furor soon produced a string of revelations that led to investigations, trials, and even suggestions that the president should resign.

Saddam, predictably, was outraged. While the Iraqi leader had never trusted the United States and had long speculated that Washington favored Tehran, this top-level public disclosure that Reagan had sold Iran the advanced weapons he denied to Baghdad had a jarring impact on the regime. “This level of bad and immoral behavior is a new thing,” Saddam remarked.

61. CIA and NSC officials accidentally delivered the wrong type of HAWKs, leading Iran to return all but one of the missiles. On the motives and details of the Iran arms sales, see Robert M. Gates, From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War (New York, 1997), 396–397; Kenneth Pollack, The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America (New York, 2004), 211–215; Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran/Contra Affair (Washington, DC, 1989), passim.


63. For Reagan’s disclosure, see Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy,” November 13, 1986, American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara.

fewer than six high-level discussions on “Irangate” (as he called it) over the next several months, and his anger is palpable in the transcripts of these meetings. At one point, he referred to the arms sales as “this injury, this stab in the back.”

Saddam had good reason to be upset, because Irangate threatened to have a number of pernicious ramifications for a regime that was already under immense pressure. The most immediate problem was that Iran’s acquisition of U.S. weapons and spare parts might imperil Iraq’s position on the battlefield. Reagan’s assurances that the arms transfers had included only defensive weapons were of little solace at a time when Iran was occupying large swaths of Iraqi territory. For his part, Aziz noted the potential effect on public morale, worrying that the Iraqi people might “ask us what is going to happen if Iran comes at us with U.S.-made weapons.” Saddam and his counselors also feared that Washington’s apparent about-face might alter the diplomatic context surrounding the conflict, easing Iran’s isolation and causing nations in Europe and the Persian Gulf to hedge their bets by tilting toward Tehran. Hasan Ali, a member of the Revolutionary Command Council, referred to Reagan’s speech as “a form of terrorism toward the region—especially the Gulf countries. Maybe once these become familiar with America’s stance, their [own] stance might look concerned, reluctant, or passive toward Iraq.”

All this added up to a deeply troubling prospect: that the United States might have abandoned its policy of tacit support for Iraq and decided to intervene conclusively on behalf of Iran. Reagan had explicitly denied this possibility in his initial speech on the subject in November 1986, but his address nonetheless contained a number of references to Tehran’s geopolitical significance and the corresponding need for “some degree of access and influence within Iran.” Any such shift could have entailed devastating effects for a weakened, besieged Iraq. Taken in the context of Saddam’s long-standing fear of U.S.-Iranian conspiracies, Reagan’s comments therefore reverberated strongly within the regime. Saddam speculated that the United States was using weapons sales as an entrée into a longer-term relationship with Iran and wondered how long U.S. military support to Tehran would continue. Along with several advisers, he also specu-

65. Saddam’s use of “Irangate” rather than “Iran-Contra” illustrates that for him, unlike most Americans, the “Iran” half of “Iran/Contra” was by far the more troubling.
68. Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy.”
lated that the United States might side with Tehran in dictating the terms of a cease-fire. Reagan had emphasized “the importance of the other party to the American interests,” Saddam said. “Well, when he leaves out [Iraq] and its significance when talking about the war between two parties, this means he might accept a sacrifice from the other party in order to please the party he is talking about.”

To forestall this scenario, Saddam mounted a surprisingly subdued diplomatic response. The United States might have betrayed Iraq, but as Saddam realized, lashing out at Washington would hardly improve his short-term prospects for military and political survival. Saddam thus avoided actions that might further damage the relationship. The Iraqi response, he told advisers, must “not provide America with the opportunity to become angrier with us.” The goal of Iraqi diplomacy, rather, would be to shore up U.S. backing for Baghdad by taking a moderate public line.

Iraqi diplomacy followed precisely this prescription in late 1986 and early 1987. Saddam vented what State Department official Richard Murphy called “the intense anger and sense of betrayal felt by the Iraqis” in a letter to Reagan, but the regime generally focused its public wrath on Israel and Iran instead of the United States. At the same time, Baghdad sought to induce Washington to reaffirm its support for Saddam’s government. Saddam’s letter to Reagan was accompanied by calls for a return to Washington’s earlier stance, and close allies like Jordan made similar statements.

To the extent that this strategy aimed to win the moral high ground in dealing with Washington, it worked. As Ambassador Newton later put it, “I never thought Iraq would be in a position to take the high road with us, but they did.” State and Defense Department officials appreciated Saddam’s relatively muted response, and amid a major Iranian offensive against Basra in late 1986 and early 1987, they pushed for substantive efforts to rebuild relations with Saddam. “It clearly was time to drop any pretense of even-handedness,” Secretary of Defense

70. CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-555, “Saddam and His Advisers Discussing Reagan’s Speech to the Nation on ‘Irangate’ (Iran-Contra) Revelations (Part 2),” November 15, 1986. See also CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-556, “Saddam Discussing ‘Irangate’ (Iran-Contra) Revelations with His Inner Circle,” undated (circa late 1986). Saddam may have feared that the United States would pressure him into accepting a cease-fire that left Iran in possession of the Fao peninsula.


74. Murphy quoted in Hilterman, Poisonous Affair, 77.
Caspar Weinberger argued at a National Security Council meeting in January 1987. “We should not only be supportive of Iraq, but should be seen to be supportive. This is an opportunity to recoup some of our standing in the region and regain credibility with the Arab states.”

In 1987, the Reagan administration quickly forgave Baghdad for the apparently inadvertent attack on the USS Stark, and Iraq received the single largest credit in the history of the CCC, totaling more than $1 billion. It also received greater intelligence sharing, increased diplomatic support in the UN Security Council, and a further loosening of restrictions on high-tech exports from the United States. In 1987–88, moreover, the United States effectively defended Iraq’s diplomatic alliances by reflagging Kuwaiti oil tankers and protecting them from Iranian attacks. By the time a truce brought an end to the war in August 1988, Saddam had reaped considerable benefits from his continued engagement with Washington.

In private, however, Irangate had a severe impact on Saddam’s already-checkered perceptions of U.S. policy. It is difficult to imagine an episode better tailored to exacerbate Saddam’s fears and suspicions in this regard—his constant wariness of conspiracies, his mistrust of American intentions, his worries about U.S.-Israeli-Iranian encirclement. Viewed through this lens, Irangate appeared not as the half-baked scheme it was, but rather as evidence of a grand conspiracy against the regime. As Deputy Prime Minister Taha Ramadan explained, U.S. support for Baghdad since 1982 had been nothing but a ruse to distract the Iraqis from Washington’s true aims: “Practically the first contact [between Iran and America] came after restoring relations [between Iraq and America], which indicates this is an intentional goal for this conspiracy. I mean, it was even intentional for our relationship to be restored after everyone calmed down and everything went back to normal.”

Indeed, if Saddam and many of his top advisers had always suspected Washington of perfidy, Irangate provided conclusive proof. Ramadan doubted that “the U.S. will stop conspiring against Iraq . . . even if the Democrats come to power.” Similarly, Saddam was coming to see an eventual confrontation with the United States as inevitable. The Duelfer Report, based on interviews with

76. The authors found nothing in the Iraqi records to suggest that this attack was anything other than accidental.
77. See Jentleson, With Friends Like These, 59–69; Karsh and Rautsi, Saddam Hussein, 160; Export-Import Bank Memorandum, September 3, 1987, NSA; State Department Memorandum, August 27, 1987, NSA.
Iraqi officials and research in captured Iraqi records, concludes that, “after
Irangate, Saddam believed that Washington could not be trusted and that it was
out to get him personally.” Long afterward, in fact, Saddam continued to frame
his relations with Washington within the context of this incident. In April 1990,
he complained to Yasser Arafat that the aim of Irangate had been to topple
the Iraqi regime, and he asserted that Washington’s hostility necessitated prepara-
tions for a major conflict with the United States. “If America strikes us, we will
hit back,” he said.8 In July, he told the U.S. ambassador, “New events remind us
that old mistakes were not just a matter of coincidence.”82 And from the late
1980s onward, Saddam would often refer back to this incident as the opening
shot in an American onslaught against Iraq. “The war was launched on us long
before all this,” Saddam said after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. “It officially
started in the 1986 meeting, and was exposed under the title ‘Irangate.’”83

FROM ONE WAR TO ANOTHER

Through the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the shared necessity of preventing an
Iranian victory kept this tension muted and lent a superficial civility to the
relationship. Behind this veneer, however, Saddam expected betrayal at every
turn. The United States had provided a small amount of military intelligence to
Iran in 1986; the presumption in Baghdad was that this relationship had never
ended. “We have to be aware of America more than the Iranians,” Saddam
remarked. “They are now the police for Iran,” he said, “anything they find they
will turn over to Iran.”89 When Saddam realized in June 1988 that a U.S. defense
attaché had observed Baghdad’s preparations to attack the Majnoon Islands, he
became convinced that Washington had relayed information on “the massing of
Iraq’s troops, their numbers, distribution, and whereabouts” to Tehran. “As a
result,” he continued, “the Iranians took precautionary measures and dispatched
forces to the Majnoon region.”88 In a broader sense, Saddam predicted that U.S.

80. Comprehensive Report of the Special Adviser to the DCI on Iraq’s WMD [Duelfer Report],
duelfer1.pdf (accessed June 23, 2009). This particular section of the report is drawn from comments by Aziz.
81. CRRC SH-SHTP-A-001-037, “Saddam Meeting with Iraqi Officials, Yasser Arafat,
and the Palestinian Delegation,” April 19, 1990; CRRC SH-SHTP-D-000-611, “Meeting with
Yasser Arafat before the Gulf War,” April 1990.
82. “Excerpts From Iraqi Document on Meeting with US Envoy,” New York Times, Sep-
83. CRRC SH-SHTP-D-000-557, “President Saddam Hussein Talks about the Historical
84. CRRC-SH-PDWN-D-000-730, “Transcripts of Conversations between Saddam
Hussein and High Ranking Officers during the Iran-Iraq War,” various dates; also CRRC
SH-SHTP-D-000-612, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and High-Ranking Officers Dis-
cussing Battles in the Iran-Iraq War,” undated.
85. Rick Francona, Ally to Adversary: An Eyewitness Account of Iraq’s Fall from Grace
(Annapolis, MD, 1999), 23; Lee Stokes, “Iraq: CIA Fed Iran Baghdad’s Battle Plans,” United
hostility to Iraq and solicitude for Israel would inevitably lead the United States to seek to prevent a decisive Iraqi victory over Iran, perhaps by meddling in the cease-fire negotiations. “Zionism will not accept an Arab army that will take its land by force,” he remarked, because “the existence of such [an] army will end Israel one day.”

That Saddam felt increasingly beleaguered by the United States during this period is evident from his reaction to U.S. naval operations in the Persian Gulf during the final phase of the war. On April 14, 1988 the USS Roberts, an American frigate, hit an Iranian mine in the Gulf. Four days later, the United States responded with OPERATION PRAYING MANTIS, a massive naval retaliation against Iranian oil platforms and ships. The operation made the United States a temporary military ally of Iraq, and Saddam conceded that “it is in our interest, at the current stage, that a clash between the Americans and Iranians would take place in the Gulf region.” Nonetheless, he and his advisors remained suspicious. He referred to the United States and Iran as “a gang” suffering from a transitory disagreement and speculated that the operation constituted an American attempt to rob Iraq of the glory it deserved for recent success in turning the tide of the war—and thus the glory Saddam deserved as a great Arab leader. As he later complained to the U.S. ambassador, the United States had rewarded Iraq for stemming the Iranian tide by wrongly taking credit for Iran’s defeat: “You know that Iran agreed to the cease fire not because the United States had bombed one of the oil platforms after the liberation of the Fao. Is this Iraq’s reward for its role in securing the stability of the region?”

The close of the war in August 1988 marked an important juncture in Iraq’s strategic posture. While Saddam claimed—and appears genuinely to have believed—that the cease-fire represented a glorious victory for Iraq, his regime faced a difficult geopolitical panorama in the late 1980s. Iraq was economically prostrate and owed billions of dollars to the Gulf states that had financed its war effort. Israel, with its considerable nuclear arsenal, remained the dominant military power in the region. Saddam was little closer to being recognized as the leader of the Arab world than he had been at the outset of the war, and the wartime insurgency by the Kurds had revived the specter of separatism. Moreover, the cessation of hostilities with Iran removed the military imperative that had compelled a degree of cooperation with the United States. Even before the war ended, Aziz had thus looked to the future with a sense of foreboding. “After the lessons Iraq has been through,” he warned in June 1988, “conspiracy is inevitable.” The United States, Israel, and others had supported Kurdish rebellions in

the past, Aziz recalled, and if Iraq did not act quickly to squelch the insurgency, they would do so again.\(^{89}\)

American behavior immediately following the war intensified Iraqi concerns. When the conflict ended, the United States terminated substantive military collaboration with Iraq, rapidly closing down seventeen military-to-military cooperation programs.\(^{90}\) More troubling still, in early September the State Department criticized recent Iraqi chemical weapon attacks against the Kurds, calling them "abhorrent and unjustifiable." According to Rick Francona, the U.S. defense attaché in Baghdad, such behavior "signaled to Baghdad clearly" that "the tactical alliance was over."\(^{91}\) Indeed, Hussein Kamil, Saddam’s son-in-law and one of his closest advisers, subsequently went on a ninety-minute tirade in a meeting with representatives of U.S. companies, arguing that American criticism was "part of [a] Zionist conspiracy to embarrass and undermine Iraq after its ‘victory’ over Iran."\(^{92}\)

As the Iranian threat to Iraq receded following the close of the war, Saddam quickly came to see the U.S.-Israel nexus, rather than Tehran, as the primary foreign threat to his regime. This sense that the United States and its allies were behind the manifold problems facing the regime was palpable during a remarkable meeting with his advisers on September 17, 1988. Saddam repeated old accusations of Washington’s perfidy. He alleged that the Americans “conspired against us in 1985 and they conspired in 1987” and that “nobody gave al-Fao [to the Iranians] except for America and England.” “I swear there is no coward like America on this planet,” he declared. Saddam slammed the Reagan administration for sanctions’ legislation against Iraq that was working its way through Congress, charging (incorrectly) that the White House was masterminding the entire process. “The administration gave them [the House and Senate] the official framework and official statements,” he believed. Arabs “from the simple porter to the president,” he added, knew the meaning of this behavior: namely, to rob Iraq of its victory in the war. “We poor Arabs, it is too much for us to be victorious.”

Saddam did not simply enumerate Washington’s past transgressions; he also outlined the ways in which the United States was actively working to destroy him. He interpreted U.S. criticism of recent Iraqi chemical weapons use as evidence that Washington was once again in league with the Kurds. “This seems like the beginnings of Irangate,” agreed Ramadan. More striking still, Saddam expressed the belief that the United States had recently tried to assassinate him by attacking a house in Iraq. The Americans “were deceived by the official cars that were there” and “thought that I was there,” he explained. Though Saddam admitted that he had no information proving

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90. Patrick Tyler, A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East—From the Cold War to the War on Terror (New York, 2010), 358.
91. Francona, Ally to Adversary, 32.
92. Baghdad to State, September 13, 1988, NSA.
American complicity, he had a “conviction...a strong feeling that they were behind it.” With the war over, he concluded later in the meeting, “they are no longer able to tolerate us.”

This sense that the regime faced a rapidly metastasizing danger from the United States permeated much of Iraqi strategic thought during the late 1980s. In September 1989, Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, Saddam’s brother-in-law and ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, advised Saddam that the United States and its allies wanted to weaken Iraq so that Washington could make a bid for hegemony in the Middle East. “The real danger [to Iraq] is the United States and its follower, Israel,” he wrote. “The Americans want to control the region and we are the only obstacle in front of them.” The United States, he warned ominously, was trying “to invade us from the inside out,” using the low price of oil and Iraq’s national debt to “impose an economic war upon us.”

The Americans might even try to assassinate Saddam. “Your Excellency knows that if an assassin is determined on killing someone, even if he sacrifices his life, there isn’t any security procedure than could be taken to prevent him from achieving his objective.”

A month later, perhaps in reference to coup-plotting rumors that swirled around Baghdad during 1988–89, Aziz complained to Secretary of State James Baker that Iraq had intelligence that “some American agencies” were seeking to replace the Ba’athist regime. In this context, Saddam was hardly heartened that the winding down of the Cold War and rapid falloff in Soviet influence during 1989–90 had left the United States with a preponderance of global power and, seemingly, a free hand to dominate the Middle East. Saddam later told military commanders that, as early as February 1990, “we expected America to stand alone in power in the world. We expected America to behave unwisely when it seized power and our expectations came true.”

In contrast to Saddam’s dire predictions, confrontation with Iraq was not what Washington intended. During its first year in office, the George H. W. Bush administration conducted an interagency review of U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf. The process revealed growing discomfort with Saddam’s more troubling tendencies—his chemical weapons use, his evident pursuit of biological and nuclear arms, his human rights abuses, his pretensions to regional leadership, among others—and officials in the State Department’s Policy

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93. CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-554, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials regarding the Political Relationship between Iraq, Iran and the USA,” September 17, 1988. It is not clear what previous “screaming” Saddam was referencing.


95. Ibid.


Planning Staff even advocated shifting to a “containment policy” designed to limit the ambitions of both Iraq and Iran.98 Yet the consensus remained that engagement, not containment, represented the best course for U.S. policy toward Iraq. According to National Security Directive 26, the authoritative statement of U.S. policy toward the Gulf, “normal relations between the United States and Iraq would serve our long-term interests in both the Gulf and the Middle East.”99 The administration released $500 million in export credits to Baghdad, even amid evidence of Iraqi financial malfeasance in the program, and sales of dual-use technology continued. “Our relationship has made steady progress,” Bush told the Iraqi ambassador in October 1989. “Our objective is to move to a better plane.”100

Multiple factors impelled Bush toward this policy. The White House and State Department continued to believe that theocratic Iran was the state most likely to challenge the status quo in the Gulf, which led to the conclusion that Washington remained somewhat reliant on a strong Iraq. Joseph McGhee, then deputy director for the Northern Gulf in the State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, recalls that “everybody was focused on the Iranians at this point,” and that “Iraq was [seen as] an asset” in consequence.101 Additionally, the CIA argued that the Baathist regime was too exhausted from the war to engage in aggression against its neighbors, while the State and Commerce Departments did not wish for American enterprises to miss out on the opportunity to participate in Iraqi reconstruction.102

Underlying all of these concerns was a persistent optimism that engagement would mellow Saddam and lead him to appreciate the benefits of enlightened cooperation with the West. If the United States helped Iraq rebuild itself, if it demonstrated that America was not hostile to Saddam’s regime, then the Baathist dictator would gradually be drawn toward a more stable relationship with the outside world. As John Kelly of the State Department recalls, the idea was that “through the ‘economic carrot’ we would try to ameliorate the regime’s behavior.” In their memoir, Bush and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft make the same argument: the aim of U.S. policy was “to encourage acceptably moderate behavior on the part of Saddam Hussein.” This policy was


102. CIA, “Iraq’s National Security Goals,” December 1988, NSA; Murphy et al. to the Secretary, December 29, 1988, NSA; Baghdad to State, May 21, 1989, NSA.
firmly supported by Saddam’s Arab neighbors, who consistently argued that isolating Iraq was more dangerous than working with it. In retrospect, Bush clearly overestimated the malleability of Saddam’s worldview. To be sure, the opportunist in Saddam had no compunctions about accepting American assistance in 1989–90, especially given that Iraq had emerged from the conflict with crippling foreign debts. U.S. agricultural credits could help pay for Iraqi food imports, and American technology could aid the country’s reconstruction. Iraqi officials actively pushed for U.S. economic assistance, and Saddam even personally welcomed a group of American businessmen to Baghdad at one juncture.

Beneath the surface, however, U.S. policies did little, if anything, to alleviate the underlying hostility in Baghdad. The combined weight of Iraqi paranoia, ingrained skepticism of American intentions, anger at recent sanctions bills in the U.S. Congress, and concrete experiences with U.S. double-dealing during the 1970s and 1980s was simply too great. In late 1988, Saddam had argued that U.S. engagement efforts were merely meant to give Washington “the proximity they need so they can strike right where they wish,” and Iraqi officials seized on discontinuities in Bush’s policy as evidence of bad faith. A number of congressmen and senators called for Bush to distance himself from Saddam in 1989–90, and in February 1990, the Voice of America beamed a radio broadcast into Iraq arguing “that the tide of history was running against dictators, and had already swept aside several, such as the Ceaucescus in Rumania.” In April, concerns about financial irregularities in the U.S. export credit program led the Department of Agriculture to recommend holding back a second $500-million tranche of credits to subsidize Iraqi purchases of American wheat. Around the same time, a GMID study concluded that the United States was furious that Iraq had won its war with Iran and was thus seeking “to modify the equation by supporting the Iranian enemy politically and through propaganda.”

103. Kelly Oral History, Foreign Affairs Oral History Program, Library of Congress; George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, A World Transformed (New York, 1998), 305; Joseph C. Wilson Oral History Interview, January 8, 2001, Foreign Affairs Oral History Program, Library of Congress. The reasoning was similar to that used during the Iran-Iraq war. The idea, State Department official Barbara Bodine later recalled, was that “if I have to get in bed with the devil, maybe I can redeem him—a little bit.” Brands telephone interview with Bodine, August 25, 2010.


himself predicted that “if the population of the Gulf—and the entire Arab world—is not vigilant, this area will be ruled by the United States.”

By early 1990, Saddam was convinced that the United States was maneuvering to weaken Iraq, cripple the Baathist regime, and thereby achieve America’s long-held goal of dominating the Persian Gulf. Israel, which Saddam considered a proxy for the United States, was thought to be a central piece in this conspiracy. Saddam told the Arab Cooperation Council in February 1990 that the United States “needs an aggressive Israel” to achieve its aims in the region, and he began to take provocative actions designed to counter the threat. Convinced that Western media criticism of Iraq’s Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) programs was part of a campaign to prepare international public opinion for an Osirak-style Israeli strike on Iraqi WMD-related facilities, Saddam calculated that a display of strength would silence his critics and serve as a warning to those tempted to cross him. In February, Iraqi authorities imprisoned Farzad Bazoft, a British journalist of Iranian origin, on charges of spying. “I say we execute him in Ramadan, and this will be the punishment for Margaret Thatcher,” Saddam told subordinates. Following Bazoft’s execution, Saddam’s lieutenants dutifully sent the corpse to London with a note attached to the coffin: “Mrs. Thatcher wanted him. We’ve sent him in a box.” In early April, Saddam publicly warned that if Israel attempted to “strike at any [Iraqi] metal industries . . . I swear to God that we will burn half of Israel.” Saddam issued this threat, he later explained, because the United States “commissioned Israel with striking at our critical establishments.” Feeling cornered, Saddam responded by lashing out.

By the spring of 1990, Saddam was effectively caught in a feedback loop of suspicion and apprehension. His erratic behavior—especially his threat to burn half of Israel—was meant to strengthen Iraqi deterrence but instead was causing increasing consternation in the United States. In April, Senator Robert Dole and several colleagues traveled to Baghdad for a meeting with Saddam. They expressed the standard desire for friendship with the Iraqi leader, but they also delivered a warning to Saddam that his weapons programs and threats against Israel were putting him on a collision course with the United States. These

comments seem simply to have increased Saddam’s worries; a week after the meeting, he told Yasser Arafat that he feared that rising tensions with Washington would lead to direct military conflict:

As you said when you prayed in Beirut and you said, ‘It is time to die, and now I can smell the breeze of heavens,’ it is the same for us. As long as the small players are gone, and it is time for America to play the game directly, we are ready for it. We are ready, we will fight America, and with God’s help we will defeat it and kick it out of the whole region. . . . We have to get ready to fight America. We are ready to fight when they are. When they strike, we will strike. . . . Maybe we cannot reach Washington, but we can send someone who has an explosive belt to reach Washington.

The United States might “bring its army and occupy Iraq,” Saddam predicted. “I wish they would do it so we can kill all Americans and sweep all of them—sweep all of them, by God.”

This elevated perception of threat was pervasive in the Iraqi national security bureaucracy in early and mid-1990. In May, the GMID issued a report predicting that Iraq would soon face a military and covert challenge from its enemies. “Both the United States of America and Britain are trying to create a political climate suitable for directing a hostile strike against the country,” the report stated. It was improbable that the Western powers would attack Iraq directly; more likely, they would “both give assistance to the Zionist entity.” GMID analysts laid out several potential courses of action open to Israel, concluding that the most likely possibilities were “attempts to personally target” Saddam and air and missile attacks against “vital targets” including nuclear and chemical facilities. Saddam apparently subscribed to this prediction; several months later he reminded aides that Washington had been “preparing Israel to attack us” during early 1990.

This growing sense of danger and urgency also characterized Saddam’s views of Kuwait in 1989–90. The Iraqi dictator’s perspective of U.S.-Kuwait relations during the 1980s provides clear evidence of his deeply conspiratorial mindset. In Saddam’s eyes, virtually any U.S. policy toward Kuwait was evidence of ill intent. If the United States failed to support Iraq sufficiently or refused to sell weapons to Kuwait, it did so out of a desire to keep the Gulf countries weak and dependent on Washington. If, on the other hand, the United States strength-
ened its political or military ties to Kuwait, it was guilty of conspiring with a
country that was one of Iraq’s major creditors—and that Iraqi officials had for
decades considered a renegade province.

It was this latter suspicion that permeated Saddam’s outlook during the late
1980s. By the close of the Iran-Iraq war, the United States had effectively
become Kuwait’s military patron, reflagging Kuwaiti tankers and deploying its
naval forces to the Persian Gulf to ensure an uninterrupted flow of Kuwaiti oil.
This naturally raised Iraqi eyebrows. “What is going on?” Aziz reported asking
Kuwaiti rulers in 1988. “Are you becoming part of the Atlantic alliance?”

Postwar U.S.-Kuwait defense ties remained a source of concern for Saddam.
In 1989–90 officials like U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander
General Norman Schwarzkopf feared that Kuwait might be attacked by Iran
(which had in fact happened on several occasions during the early 1980s).
Notwithstanding the generally accommodating tone of U.S. policy toward
Baghdad, there was also concern that the wealthy emirate might make a tempt-
ing target for a bankrupt Iraq. Accordingly, Schwarzkopf publicly averred Wash-
ington’s commitment to Kuwaiti security and directed CENTCOM officials to
change the long-standing war plan aimed at defending Iran against a Soviet
invasion to instead focus on the defense of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia against Iraqi
aggression. CENTCOM also offered to send U.S. ships on port calls to
various Gulf countries as a signal of Washington’s commitment, and in July
1990, the command ran an exercise simulating a U.S. response to a hypothetical
attack on Kuwait.

U.S. officials intended these initiatives to deter potential aggression against
Kuwait, yet for Saddam they proved that Washington intended to use that
country in its designs against his regime. The Americans had wanted to stoke the
“animosity” between Kuwait and Iraq, he later said. Washington had therefore
provided Schwarzkopf with “plans and military maneuvers” to attack Iraq and
told the Kuwaitis not to resolve their border dispute with Baghdad. At the
time, Saddam repeatedly underscored the same themes. In a July 1990 meeting

Criticizes U.S. Talks with Kurdish Leader,” BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, June 14,


118. For Schwarzkopf’s statements and Iraqi analysis of those statements, see Richard Pyle,
“Top U.S. Commander Says U.S. Gained Credibility in Gulf,” Associated Press, October 18,
1988; “US outlines commitment to Gulf,” MidEast Markets, October 30, 1989; CRRC
SH-GMID-D-000263 “General Military Intelligence Directorate Correspondence Regarding

119. Oral History Interview with Ambassador Gordon Brown, December 14, 1999, and
Oral History Interview with Joseph R. McGhee, August 21, 1997, Foreign Affairs Oral History
Program, Library of Congress; Robert H. Scales, Certain Victory: The US Army in the Gulf War
(Washington DC, 1994), 43–44.

120. CRRC SH-SPPC-D-000-334, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Russian Deleg-
ation,” July 2001. Years later, while in U.S. captivity, Saddam underscored the same issue,
saying that U.S. military ties with Kuwait in 1989–90 provided evidence of a conspiracy against
Iraq. George Piro Interview Session 9, February 24, 2004, EBB 279, NSA.
with advisers, he termed the United States “this corrupt society that bears a
grudge towards the Arabs, progress, and patriotism. . . . They don’t want to see
honorable men in the world but they want them all to follow their wishes.”

More specifically, he publicly accused the United States and Israel of using
Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates as pawns in a scheme to destroy Iraq’s
economy. Saddam alleged that Washington had encouraged these countries to
exceed their OPEC production quotas, thus lowering the price of oil, and he
described these measures as acts of war against Iraq. “They have used every
arrow in their quiver except direct military aggression.” Similarly, Aziz later
claimed that the tensions with Kuwait were part of “a conspiracy against Iraq, a
deliberate conspiracy against Iraq, by Kuwait, organized, devised by the United
States.”

All of this raises an important question: what role did Saddam’s perception of
U.S. policy play in the decision to resolve his dispute with Kuwait by force in
August 1990? In our research, we found no “smoking gun” document that
precisely lays out the thinking behind Saddam’s eventual decision to invade
Kuwait or even a document that conclusively establishes the date at which this
decision was made. In all likelihood, the decision stemmed from a variety of
interlocking issues: Iraq’s precarious financial position, Saddam’s desire to
assert Iraqi hegemony and leadership within the Middle East, a calculation that
Kuwait’s unpopularity in the Arab world made a united regional response
unlikely, and others. Of these, the economic issue was probably particularly
important; at the very least, it lent urgency to Iraqi decision making. More
prosaic factors—such as Saddam’s temper—may also have been involved.

Yet Saddam’s view of the United States and its relations with Kuwait, and his
aggressive behavior in early 1990, raise the distinct possibility that Saddam saw
the invasion as a way of seizing the initiative in his intensifying confrontation
with the United States. The evidence indicates that Saddam saw conflict with
the United States as inevitable, that he viewed Washington and its allies as
potentially mortal threats to Iraq, that after the Iran-Iraq war he believed this
conspiracy would unfold sooner rather than later, and that he had identified
Kuwait as a key player in U.S. designs. And, as discussed above, Saddam does not
seem to have disaggregated the various problems he faced in mid-1990; he
viewed these issues as part of an interconnected web of threat in which the
United States and its allies were heavily involved. Given these beliefs, Saddam
may well have concluded that a lightning strike against Kuwait made good
strategic sense: it would put an end to Kuwaiti plotting and place Iraq in a much
stronger economic and geopolitical position vis-à-vis the United States and
Israel.

122. “Saddam Speech Marks Revolution’s 22nd Anniversary,” FBIS-NES-90-137, July 17,
1990.
Indeed, Saddam had long placed a premium on seizing the initiative through preemptive and preventive attacks. In 1980, facing an increasingly turbulent neighbor whose military was temporarily weakened by revolutionary purges, he did just this by assauling Iran.\textsuperscript{124} As he told senior army staff in February 1984, “one of the most distinguishing factors among military personnel is the ability to attack successfully and defeat the enemy instead of waiting for the enemy to wage his attack.”\textsuperscript{125} Saddam was also personally involved in the drafting of a Republican Guard manual on preemptive attacks in 1985.\textsuperscript{126} Much later, from U.S. captivity, he noted that in a fluid, dangerous geopolitical environment, “being at peace is not easy.”\textsuperscript{127}

This interpretation of Saddam’s strategic thinking is admittedly somewhat speculative, but it is supported by several statements he made before and after the invasion. “America is coordinating with Saudi Arabia and UAE and Kuwait in a conspiracy against us,” Saddam told an adviser in March 1990. “They are trying to reduce the price of oil to affect our military industries and our scientific research.” The window for defeating this conspiracy, he concluded, was closing.\textsuperscript{128} Saddam returned to this same theme numerous times in the period between August 1990 and January 1991—the period following the invasion but before it had become clear that Iraq faced a military disaster because of this decision. “The Americans didn’t give us any rest,” he complained in October 1990. “Even if we did not have a historical background with Kuwait, we would have done this same thing because our only choice that was presented to us was to collapse, so the Americans and the backward ones can do what they wished. Our only choice was to go after the circle of conspirators tasked with this mission.”\textsuperscript{129} Likewise, in January 1991, Taha Ramadan argued that Iraq had not had any choice but to move boldly. “The battle is inevitable,” he said.

Imagine if we had waited two years, and the Gulf oil policy had continued as it is. Iraq is $50 billion in debt and the price of oil does not meet 50\% of our even minimal needs, with our indebtedness eating up 50\% of our earnings at

\textsuperscript{124} Saddam and his advisers generally failed to make a clear distinction between “preemptive” attacks (attacks designed to thwart an imminent enemy military assault) and “preventive” attacks (attacks initiated in order to prevent an adverse shift in the balance of power). In the Iranian case, senior Iraqi officials alleged that Iranian border violations in September 1980 were prelude to a larger attack, but they also perceived a window of opportunity to undermine Iran’s new rulers while the Iranian military was in a state of disarray. As the GMID reported in July 1980, “Ten thousand [officers] have been discharged or gone into retirement.... Since June 28, 1980, one hundred individuals have been discharged or retire daily.” Captured Record, “GMID Intelligence Reports on Iran,” June–July 1980.

\textsuperscript{125} Captured Record, “Meeting Regarding Military Operations,” February 1984.


\textsuperscript{127} George Piro, Interview of Saddam, Session Number 3, February 10, 2004, EBB 279, NSA.

\textsuperscript{128} Gause, “Iraq’s Decisions to Go to War,” 56.

\textsuperscript{129} CRRC SH-PDWN-D-000-533, “Meeting between Saddam Hussein and the Soviet Delegation,” October 1990.
this price and with the interest on the loans. The Western states and America decided to stop exporting technology to us after April 1990, and America stopped agricultural facilities [subsidized exports to Iraq] in March 1990 by Congressional decision. It is possible that this boycott might have spread to other European countries as the technology boycott spread.

How were we going to maintain the loyalty of the people and their support for the leader if they saw the inability of the leadership to provide a minimal standard of living in this rich country? In this situation, could you lead the army and the people in any battle, no matter what its level and under any banner? I think not. . . . If death is definitely coming to this people and this revolution, let it come while we are standing.¹³⁰

This same rationale is evident in numerous other statements, both public and private.¹³¹ Whether Saddam had always intended to take all of Kuwait, or whether he made this decision at the last moment, remains unclear from the captured documents consulted by the authors. What is clear is that in the run-up to August 2, Saddam was heavily influenced by preventive motivations and his sense of a looming conflict with Washington and its minions, in addition to the economic and political issues discussed above.

Saddam’s strategic calculus does not appear to have been driven by the reverse calculation—an expectation of American acquiescence or leniency. The common assertion that Saddam perceived a “green light” from Ambassador April Glaspie or other officials in the months prior to the invasion does not withstand serious scrutiny. In Glaspie’s July 25 meeting with Saddam, she assured her interlocutor of Washington’s desire for friendship and that the United States took no position on the merits of any of the (many) Arab-Arab border demarcation disputes. Taking a legal position on the proper border, Glaspie cabled Washington, would have “change[d] radically our policy.” Yet she also warned Saddam against trying to settle any dispute with Kuwait by force and told the Iraqi leader that the United States would “never excuse settlement of disputes by other than peaceful means” [emphasis added].¹³² Moreover, even if Glaspie had given Saddam a “green light” during this meeting, he would almost certainly not have taken this statement at face value given his abiding fear of American perfidy. Saddam smelled an American trap in nearly every initiative launched by Washington and nearly every geopolitical event affecting Iraq. Why would he have now believed that the United States would allow him to

dominate the Gulf when it had so assiduously worked to prevent either Iraq or Iran from doing so during the 1980s?

Beyond all this, the “green light” assertion is not sustained in the available Iraqi documents. Publicly, Saddam later claimed that Glaspie had misled him, but in private he made no such statements that we have found so far.\textsuperscript{133} Whereas Saddam and his advisers spoke frequently of U.S. treachery against Iraq for supporting Kurdish insurrections, causing the Iranian revolution, arming Iran and providing it with intelligence during the 1980s, intentionally misleading Iraq with phony intelligence, and seeking to destroy Iraq during the interwar years, we have found nothing in the captured Iraqi documents or recordings indicating that Saddam or his principal advisers perceived a “green light” to invade Kuwait.

In fact, the captured documents point in the opposite direction. In the period preceding the invasion, Iraqi officials regularly stated that invading Kuwait would entail a military confrontation with the United States. In 1989, the GMID assessed that Schwarzkopf’s recent visit to Kuwait revealed that “America has pledged to defend the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to protect them from any aggression they might encounter.”\textsuperscript{134} In July 1990, the same agency concluded that, in the event of an Iraqi invasion, Kuwait would receive military support from the United States and potentially from other countries as well.\textsuperscript{135} Saddam apparently agreed with this assessment. In a conversation with his advisers shortly after the invasion, he claimed that before invading Kuwait, the Iraqi leadership had taken into account that the United States might retaliate with “a complete boycott” and “strike us in the air, land, and sea—everywhere.”\textsuperscript{136} Saddam did not expect forbearance from a country he considered an aggressive imperial power; he expected conflict.

CONCLUSION

U.S. diplomats stationed in Baghdad during the 1970s and 1980s were often struck by the vituperative anti-Americanism that characterized Saddam’s rhetoric and Iraqi public discourse.\textsuperscript{137} This rhetoric was politically expedient for


\textsuperscript{134} CRRC SH-GMID-D-000-263, “General Military Intelligence Directorate Correspondence Regarding First Gulf War,” October 1989–August 1990.

\textsuperscript{135} CRRC SH-GMID-D-000-513, “General Military Intelligence Directorate Reports,” July 1990. In a cable on July 25, 1990, GMID officials predicted that “in case of any armed conflict with Kuwait,” the Gulf Arabs “would support Kuwait militarily and politically. In addition, the United States declared that it would intervene to help Kuwait if there was any serious threat.”

\textsuperscript{136} Captured Record, “Meeting with High-Ranking Baath Officials,” August 7, 1990.

the Iraqi regime, but it also seems to have reflected what Saddam genuinely believed—or at least what he said in private—about U.S. policy in the region. From the time Saddam came to political power in the late 1960s through the invasion of Kuwait more than two decades later, his view of Washington was dominated by remarkable suspicion and hostility. This outlook remained intact even during the period of relatively cooperative relations with the United States during the early and mid-1980s, and to the extent it changed thereafter, it only became more pronounced.

Was this a rational perspective on the United States and its role in the Middle East? Many of the ideas espoused by Saddam—the belief that Washington was behind the Iranian revolution chief among them—were gross misrepresentations of reality. Saddam’s anti-Semitism, his Baathist ideology, his inflated self-image, and his penchant for conspiracy thinking fundamentally distorted his perceptions of world affairs and predisposed him to see American influence in whatever misfortune befell his regime. Yet these perceptions derived from a conspiratorial mindset that was, in its own way, eminently useful, in that it led Saddam to create overlapping layers of internal security that allowed him to sustain the Baathist regime for thirty-five years. And while Saddam’s fears were exaggerated, they were not completely baseless. Harming Iraq was never the primary purpose of U.S. policy during this period—broader considerations such as containing Soviet influence and maintaining regional stability took pride of place—yet American initiatives were frequently prejudicial to Saddam’s government. From U.S. support for the Kurds in the 1970s through Irangate in the 1980s, Washington’s policies confirmed Saddam’s gravest suspicions and made the conspiracy theorist, at least in his own eyes, a prophet. Viewed in this light, asking whether Saddam was rational or irrational may be a less profitable endeavor than examining the way in which such factors as ideology, personality, and concrete experience mixed to produce such an extreme and aggressive worldview.

The nature and trajectory of Saddam’s strategic view of the United States cast strong doubt on two notions that remain prevalent in popular discourse and the academic literature: the idea that Iraq was a pliant, accommodating U.S. proxy during the 1980s, and the argument that by engaging and supporting Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war, Washington encouraged Saddam to think that it would tolerate his invasion of Kuwait.138 In one sense, these arguments exaggerate the level of U.S. support for Iraq during the 1980s, which was more limited and ambivalent than has often been suggested. More important, these assertions are irreconcilable with Saddam’s deeply held and frequently stated view of American intentions. Saddam was certainly opportunistic in dealing with Washington; of this there is no doubt. Yet U.S. assistance earned little gratitude from Iraq, and by the late 1980s, Saddam believed that Washington was actively conspiring

138. See Note 4, above.
against his ambitions, his regime, and even his life. There were unquestionably multiple factors that figured into Saddam’s decision to take Kuwait, but his view of U.S. intentions made him intensely apprehensive and, in the months prior to the war, helped push him toward radical, aggressive behavior. Insofar as U.S. policy influenced Saddam’s decision to invade Kuwait, it did so by seeming to threaten—not to reassure or encourage—a dictator who had long feared Washington’s intrigues.