



# THE ORIGINS OF THE IRAQI INVASION OF KUWAIT RECONSIDERED

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For over 30 years, policymakers and scholars have taken for granted that Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait simply to seize its oil. That narrative misleadingly suggests that the Iraqi invasion happened to coincide with, but was unrelated to, the dawn of the post-Cold War era. In fact, Saddam's decision-making was inextricable from his interpretation of the end of the Cold War. In late 1989 and early 1990, he posited that Soviet retrenchment portended a five-year period of American unipolarity, after which Japan and Germany would restore a global balance of power. Until that new equilibrium emerged, Saddam genuinely feared that the United States and Israel would use their unchecked power to destabilize his regime in pursuit of their hegemony over the Middle East. In the summer of 1990, Kuwait's oil overproduction persuaded the Iraqi leadership that the Kuwaiti royal family was complicit in the U.S.-led plot that they believed was already in full swing.

**O**n Feb. 24, 1990, Saddam Hussein publicly ventured an answer to the question that he and his inner circle had debated behind closed doors since late 1989: What did the end of the Cold War portend for the Middle East? "I think we can all agree that our meeting faces a special task of the highest priority," the Iraqi president told his audience of dignitaries at the Arab Cooperation Council, then meeting in Amman for its second annual summit, "and that is to discuss and analyze the changes in the international arena and their effects on our countries and the Arab nation in particular, and on the world in general."<sup>1</sup> Saddam shed no tears for the collapse of communism *per se*. His regime had long persecuted Iraqi communists, after all, and the nominally socialist Baath Party had introduced market reforms years earlier in a scramble to salvage the country's war-ravaged economy. Saddam was preoccupied with Soviet retrenchment for reasons that transcended ideology. From his vantage point, the Cold War had been not only an ideological contest, but a delicate balancing act between the United States and the Soviet Union. What might befall the world if the latter suddenly abdicated its superpower status?

The answer, Saddam warned his audience, was

the advent of unchecked U.S. power on the world stage — a phenomenon that the neoconservative commentator Charles Krauthammer would soon call "unipolarity."<sup>2</sup> With Soviet strength dwindling, "it has become clear to everyone that America has temporarily assumed a predominant position in international politics." Within five years, an economically ascendant Japan and a unified Europe would restore an international equilibrium. But until that new balance of power emerged, the United States and its ally Israel were likely to exploit their fleeting supremacy to assert hegemony over the Middle East and its wealth of natural resources. For that reason, "the Arabs must bear in mind the serious prospect that Israel will embark on new stupidities" — that is, initiate a new war — and that it would do so with "direct encouragement" or "tacit" support from Washington.

It was no accident that Saddam chose this venue, the Arab Cooperation Council, to unveil his vision of the dangers awaiting the Arab Middle East in a post-Cold War era. Founded one year earlier by Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, the council was the latest in a long string of attempts to forge some degree of cohesion across the chronically fractured Arab political landscape. As Saddam looked out

<sup>1</sup> This and the following two paragraphs draw from Saddam's speech at the Arab Cooperation Council summit on Feb. 24, 1990. The text of the speech is printed in *al-Thawra*, February 25, 1990, 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Washington Post*, July 20, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/07/20/the-unipolar-moment/62867add-2fe9-493f-a0c9-4bfbafec23bd/>; Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/1991): 23-33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20044692>.

upon a world in the throes of revolutionary change, it was precisely this absence of inter-Arab cooperation that troubled him. The Soviet empire was crumbling. New powers and regional groupings in Europe and Asia were angling to fill the void. Israel was reaping the rewards of *perestroika* — Mikhail Gorbachev's program of liberal reforms — welcoming thousands of new Soviet Jewish immigrants to its shores each week. Amid all this upheaval, the Arab states had taken no steps to close ranks. If they were to have any weight in the post-Cold War balance now taking shape, they could afford disunity no longer. "Our ostensible weakness does not lie in our hereditary or intellectual characteristics," but "in the distrust among us," Saddam concluded. "Let our slogan be: We are all strong in our unity, and we are all weak in our division."

Less than six months after Saddam uttered these words, Iraq invaded Kuwait. This article rethinks why. Drawing on Iraqi, American, and British archival materials, memoirs, and periodicals, it argues that the answer has less to do with Saddam's interest in seizing Kuwaiti oil wealth than with his interpretation of the shifting global balance of power at the end of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> When George H. W. Bush entered office in January 1989, Saddam and some of his closest advisers believed that the new U.S. president recognized Iraq as a regional power. They even hoped that Bush — whom they considered a less ideological, more pragmatic figure than Ronald Reagan — might inaugurate a new era of more cooperative and evenhanded U.S. relations with the Arab world. As the year progressed, however, Iraq's leaders became wary of the Bush administration's intentions toward their regime fearing that Washington was more interested in asserting its hegemony over the Persian Gulf than maintaining constructive relations with Iraq.

By November 1989, as revolution roiled the Eastern bloc and Gorbachev's Soviet Union increasingly seemed a shadow of its former self, the Iraqi leadership grasped that the world stood on the precipice

of a unipolar moment. But a moment was all it would be. As Saddam hypothesized on multiple occasions in late 1989 and early 1990, including in his February speech at the Arab Cooperation Council summit, the unipolar world was bound to become multipolar: Within five years, Japan, Germany, and others would restore a global balance of power. In the meantime, Saddam believed that the United States would be all the more tempted to seize control of the Persian Gulf oil on which America's post-Cold War competitors would rely. Iraq, having emerged from its war with Iran as the strongest regional power and the self-styled leader of the Arab world, stood as the greatest obstacle to those designs.

From December 1989 onward, Saddam's fears of unipolarity and suspicions of Bush's intentions comingled with ominous intelligence reports that Israel was preparing to launch a surprise attack on Iraq, just as it had done in 1981, when the Israeli Air Force bombed the Osirak nuclear reactor outside Baghdad. Mass Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel, the Israeli prime minister's proclamation in January 1990 that this provided a pretext to retain the occupied territories, and talk of a new *nakba* (the Palestinian "catastrophe" of 1948) across the Arabic-speaking world bolstered Saddam's fears that Israel was readying for an expansionist war. Saddam, in turn, employed increasingly bellicose rhetoric toward the United States and Israel, culminating in his threat in April 1990 to deploy chemical weapons and "make fire eat half of Israel," if the Israeli government dared to strike Iraq first.

Until the summer of 1990, when Saddam abruptly assumed a more belligerent posture toward the Kuwaiti royal family, it was an Iraqi war with *Israel*, not its Gulf neighbors, that seemed the most likely prospect to outside observers. How then do we make sense of Saddam's pivot to Kuwait? Some have suggested that his belligerence toward Israel in early 1990 was merely a "smokescreen" to confound the West and garner popular Arab support while he quietly prepared to seize Ku-

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3 This article draws heavily from the Iraqi archival materials held at the now-defunct Conflict Records Research Center (CRR) at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. The center provided English translations of materials seized by U.S. forces in 2003, including transcripts of recordings of Saddam's deliberations with his advisors. I thank Michael Brill for providing me access to the center's materials after its closure in 2015. The English translations are poor, and in most cases the original Arabic sources are not provided. Select transcripts have been republished in edited volumes. See 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: Institute for Defense Analyses, March 2010), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1124180.pdf>; Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki, and Mark Stout, *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime, 1978-2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). To a lesser extent, this article also draws on the Hoover Institution's Baath Regional Command Collection, which comprises nearly three million pages of Baath Party documents transferred to the United States after the 2003 invasion. Scholars have written extensively about the ethical and methodological issues raised by the Conflict Records Research Center and Hoover collections. See, e.g., Michelle Caswell, "Thank You Very Much, Now Give Them Back: Cultural Property and the Fight over the Iraqi Baath Party Records," *The American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 211-40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23079007>; Sinan Antoon, "Plundering the Past: Scholarly Treasures," *Jadaliyya*, February 22, 2012, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/25296/Plundering-the-Past-Scholarly-Treasures>; Arbella Bet-Shlomon, "Preservation or Plunder? The ISIS Files and a History of Heritage Removal in Iraq," *MERIP*, May 8, 2018, <https://merip.org/2018/05/preservation-or-plunder-the-isis-files-and-a-history-of-heritage-removal-in-iraq/>; Wisam H. Alshaibi, "Weaponizing Iraq's Archives," *MERIP*, September 23, 2019, <https://merip.org/2019/09/weaponizing-iraqs-archives/>. I have used these collections while remaining cognizant of their ethically dubious provenance and limitations. Moreover, to the greatest extent possible, I have sought to cross-check them against other sources, including Iraqi memoirs and U.S. and British archival materials.



wait, which had been in his crosshairs all along.<sup>4</sup> Others have speculated that Saddam exploited the Zionist bogeyman to distract Iraqis from their own economic woes after the futility of the eight-year war with Iran became plain to see.<sup>5</sup> This article, by contrast, contends that his apprehensions about Israeli hostility were genuine, and that the accusations he leveled against Kuwait were inextricable from those apprehensions. Since 1989, Kuwait had produced oil in excess of the quota assigned to it by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries to the detriment of the moribund Iraqi economy. Already convinced that the United States was bent on exploiting unipolarity to undermine his regime, Saddam concluded by the summer that the Kuwaiti royal family was complicit in the American-led “conspiracy” (*mu’amara*) to weaken Iraq economically ahead of an Israeli military strike. In this light, seizing Kuwaiti oil was not an end in itself, but a means to break up the larger plot to which the royal family was party. “The battle is broader than Kuwait,” Saddam privately told one visitor in the fall of 1990, implying that the invasion had less to do with Kuwait than with the American-led conspiracy that it ostensibly served.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the overwhelming evidence that Saddam’s fear of this conspiracy was genuine, it is largely absent from scholarly and popular accounts of the Gulf War.<sup>7</sup> Conventional wisdom holds that Saddam seized Kuwait simply to escape his dire economic straits after the eight-year war with Iran, during which Iraq accrued an estimated \$80 billion in debt to other Arab states, Western governments, and international creditors. Against the backdrop of these more immediate economic considerations

was the longstanding Iraqi border dispute with Kuwait. On multiple occasions since the 1930s, leaders in Baghdad had laid claim to some or all of Kuwait. In doing so, they invoked a popular but specious narrative that Kuwait was an “artificial entity” carved out of the province of Basra by conniving British imperialists.<sup>8</sup> According to this narrative, Saddam invaded Kuwait to annul his debts, seize a commanding share of the world’s proven oil reserves, and acquire an outlet to the Persian Gulf all in one fell swoop.

## By tracing the evolution of his thinking as the Cold War came to an end, and by viewing his actions within the broader arc of Iraq’s encounters with the United States, we gain new insights into the logic that led Saddam to invade Kuwait.

A second entrenched narrative takes an American-centric approach, pinning blame for the invasion of Kuwait on the Reagan administration’s misbegotten ploy to temper Saddam’s “radicalism” in the name of containing revolutionary Iran. In 1989, the new Bush administration clung to its predecessor’s policy, hoping, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, that Saddam had emerged from the war with Iran a bulwark of “moderation” in a volatile region. Just one week before the invasion, the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad, April Glaspie, informed Saddam that the United States took “no position” on his dispute with the Kuwaitis. Whether or not Saddam interpreted Glaspie’s remark as a “green light” to seize Kuwait, as some critics later charged, it should have been clear long before the invasion transpired that Washington’s efforts to

4 Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie, *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf* (New York: Times Books, 1990), 8–14, 20–21.

5 Amatzia Baram, “The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait: Decision-Making in Baghdad,” in *Iraq’s Road to War*, ed. Amatzia Baram and Barry M. Rubin (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 7, 11; Kevin Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein’s Strategic Plan for the Gulf War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 41.

6 CRRC SH-PDWN-D-000-467, “Meeting Between Saddam Hussein and Sheikh Sidi Ahmad Walad Baba, the Mauritanian Minister of Interior, Regarding His Support for Iraq,” October 4, 1990.

7 One of the few scholars who has offered a similar argument — but who did not have access to the Iraqi, U.S., and British documents now available — is the political scientist F. Gregory Gause, who in the early 2000s wrote two highly perceptive pieces on Saddam’s rationale for invading Kuwait. See F. Gregory Gause, “Iraq and the Gulf War: Decision-Making in Baghdad,” October 2001, <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/case-study/gaf01/gaf01.pdf>; F. Gregory Gause, “Iraq’s Decisions to Go to War, 1980 and 1990,” *The Middle East Journal* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 47–70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4329720>. More recently, other scholars have offered similar arguments, but they do not acknowledge the centrality of the end of the Cold War to Saddam’s decision-making. See, e.g., Hal Brands, “Saddam and Israel: What Do the New Iraqi Records Reveal?,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 3 (September 2011): 513, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2011.599658>; Emily Meierding, *The Oil Wars Myth: Petroleum and the Causes of International Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), ch. 8.

8 On the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border dispute, see David H. Finnie, *Shifting Lines in the Sand: Kuwait’s Elusive Frontier with Iraq* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Richard N. Schofield, *Kuwait and Iraq: Historical Claims and Territorial Disputes*, 2nd ed. (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1993); Peter Sluglett, “The Resilience of a Frontier: Ottoman and Iraqi Claims to Kuwait, 1871–1990,” *The International History Review* 24, no. 4 (2002): 783–816, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2002.9640981>.

modify Iraqi behavior had failed miserably.<sup>9</sup>

These narratives misleadingly imply that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait took place in a Middle Eastern vacuum, as if it just happened to coincide with U.S.-Soviet rapprochement and the dawn of the post-Cold War era. In this vein, one commonly encounters the argument — advanced by policymakers, journalists, and scholars alike — that Saddam erred in presuming that the United States would tolerate his aggression against Kuwait, or that, in the worst-case scenario, Moscow would step in to protect him against American intervention.<sup>10</sup> “Viewing the dynamics of the Cold War as perpetual,” one historian has recently written, “Hussein was unable to accept, until his troops joined battle with U.S. forces, that the USSR would not save his regime.”<sup>11</sup> In this depiction, Iraq and its leadership were behind the times, incapable of grasping that the world around them was in the throes of radical change until it was too late.

This article argues otherwise. To say that the end of the Cold War was peripheral to the Iraqi leadership’s decision-making would be to ignore the wealth of evidence that Saddam and his advisers keenly monitored and hotly debated the global repercussions of Soviet retrenchment, the collapse of communism, and the shifting balance of power from late 1989 onward. By the time Iraq invaded Kuwait, its leaders had already concluded that Gorbachev was inclined to sacrifice Moscow’s traditional Third World partners on the altar of closer relations with Washington. Indeed, it was precisely the *imbalance* of power resulting from Soviet decline that preoccupied Saddam and those in his orbit.

Too often, studies of this historical episode fall back on tired tropes, chalking up the invasion of

Kuwait to Saddam’s supposed irrationality, megalomania, and greed. Juxtaposing Iraqi and American sources and perspectives reveals a more mundane reality: Saddam poorly understood the United States. No less importantly, he felt misunderstood by his American interlocutors. By tracing the evolution of his thinking as the Cold War came to an end, and by viewing his actions within the broader arc of Iraq’s encounters with the United States, we gain new insights into the logic that led Saddam to invade Kuwait. To explain the provenance of that logic is not to condone his aggression.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it is to appreciate the ways in which an actor seemingly far removed from the upheaval attendant to the end of the Cold War perceived himself to be central to it and acted accordingly.

More broadly, this article makes the case for widening the aperture of the end of the Cold War beyond a trans-Atlantic and European frame. For all of the recent interest in U.S.-Soviet competition in the Third World, the literature on the Cold War’s final chapter remains almost entirely confined to Eastern bloc upheaval and to U.S.-Soviet summitry.<sup>13</sup> This is unsurprising, given that the events most commonly associated with the end of that era took place in those contexts. By centering Iraq’s interpretations of the end of the Cold War, however, it quickly becomes clear that Saddam and his associates understood themselves to be participants in a *global* struggle to define the contours of a post-Cold War order no less than American, European, and Soviet leaders did. Contrary to those who argue that the Middle East “exited the structures of the global Cold War” by the mid-1980s, this article proposes that viewing the end of the Cold War through Iraqi eyes opens new avenues for historical research into the making of a post-Cold War world.<sup>14</sup>

9 See, e.g., Miller and Mylroie, *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf*; Elaine Sciolino, *The Outlaw State: Saddam Hussein's Quest for Power and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: Wiley, 1991); Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982-1990* (New York: Norton, 1994). On the “green light,” see, e.g., Sami Yousif, “The Iraqi-U.S. War: A Conspiracy Theory,” in *The Gulf War and the New World Order*, ed. Haim Bresheeth and Nira Yuval-Davis (London: Zed Books, 1991); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy*, November 3, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/03/an-unnecessary-war-2/>. A more extreme version of this narrative is found in Ramsey Clark, *The Fire This Time: U.S. War Crimes in the Gulf*, 1st ed. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992). Clark, a former U.S. attorney general turned strident critic of American empire, argues that the Bush administration duped Saddam into invading Kuwait, rendering the Iraqi leader a hapless victim of U.S. machinations.

10 Bruce P. Montgomery, *The Seizure of Saddam Hussein's Archive of Atrocity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 11–12.

11 Carl Forsberg, “Iraq, the United States, and the Long Shadow of the Cold War,” *Cold War History* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 474–75, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iraq-united-states-and-long-shadow-cold-war>.

12 In this connection, the article takes its cue from two of Saddam’s biographers, Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi. As they have aptly written, the “Butcher of Baghdad” epithet that would become commonplace in Western political discourse “tends to demonize rather than explain” Saddam’s behavior. Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 5.

13 The already voluminous literature on the end of the Cold War in its European and trans-Atlantic context grows richer each year. See, to name just a few recent examples, Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (Yale University Press, 2021); Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Cornell University Press, 2022); William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink* (Penguin, 2022).

14 Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 491. Similarly, the historian Salim Yaqub has written that “the post-cold war era dawned over the Middle East” a full decade before the Soviet Union itself crumbled. Salim Yaqub, “The Cold War and the Middle East,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 247, 261.

## The World According to Saddam Hussein

Understanding Saddam's interpretation of the end of the Cold War and, relatedly, his decision to invade Kuwait requires taking seriously his worldview. That worldview rested on a simple but powerful premise. The Arabs had once been a proud, prosperous, unified nation on the cutting edge of civilizational achievement. But foreign imperialists — Persian, Ottoman, and European — had subjugated the Arabs, sowed the seeds of discord among them, and denied them the tools to achieve social, economic, and scientific progress. Only through unity, self-reliance, and economic development would the Arabs recover their past glory, transcend the humiliation of imperialism, and reclaim their place in the sun. Such was the creed of Baathism — Arabic for resurrection, renaissance, revival — the revolutionary political movement founded by Syrian intellectuals in 1947 on the pillars of Arab unity, anti-imperialism, and socialism.<sup>15</sup>

A young Saddam gravitated to Baathism by way of his maternal uncle, Khairallah Talfah, with whom he lived throughout his adolescence in their native Tikrit and subsequently in Baghdad. Talfah's staunch Arab nationalism, animosity toward British imperialism, and tales of ancient Iraqi glory left an indelible mark on his nephew's political outlook. The title of Talfah's manifesto, published in 1981 by the Iraqi state press, laid bare his politics and prejudices in no uncertain terms: *Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews, and Flies*.<sup>16</sup> In 1955, Saddam followed in Talfah's footsteps and joined the Iraqi branch of the Baath

Party, whose membership then numbered just 289.<sup>17</sup> Over the next decade and a half, the Baathists partook in a series of coups and partisan power struggles, operating on the margins of Iraqi politics until seizing power in their own right in the revolution of 1968. After serving as head of internal security and deputy chairman of the ruling Revolutionary Command Council under his cousin and fellow Tikriti, President Ahmed Hassan al Bakr, Saddam assumed power in 1979.<sup>18</sup>

Until the invasion of Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990, Saddam's relationship with the United States was fraught with suspicion, vacillating between tentative friendship and open enmity. Baathist ideology did not preclude an alliance of convenience with the United States when circumstances demanded, as during the war with Iran.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Saddam perceived Washington as the heir to the European empires of old.<sup>20</sup> In his telling, Arabs had once looked to the United States as a beacon in their fight against the "old imperialism" of the British and French, only to discover after World War II that America, far from eradicating European imperialists in the Middle East, merely "supplanted" them.<sup>21</sup> U.S. alliances with Turkey and the Iranian shah, covert support for Iraqi Kurdish rebels in the early 1970s, and secret arms sales to Tehran in the mid-1980s were all consonant with the long-standing Western strategy to subdue and splinter the region's Arab majority through alliances with non-Arab states and ethnic minorities.<sup>22</sup>

Above all, Saddam's relations with the United States were inextricable from his perception of Zionism and its "entity," the state of Israel.<sup>23</sup> Not unlike other Baathists of his generation, Saddam

15 Baathism initially attracted its largest following in its country of origin, Syria. In neighboring Iraq, the movement was marginal in Iraqi politics until it briefly came to power in the revolution of 1963 and again in 1968. On the Baath Party in Iraq, see, e.g., Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33–48; Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

16 Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, Updated ed. with new introd. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 17n21.

17 Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 743.

18 On Saddam's early years, foray into the world of Arab nationalism, and rise to power, see Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, 6–15; Musallam Ali Musallam, *The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait: Saddam Hussein, His State, and International Power Politics* (London: British Academic Press, 1996), chap. 1; Saïd K. Aburish, *Saddam Hussein: The Politics of Revenge* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 9–37; Jerrold M. Post and Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Is Iraq: Iraq Is Saddam* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: USAF Counterproliferation Center, Air University, 2002), 1–15, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA424787.pdf>. Two semi-official biographies of Saddam were published shortly after his rise to the pinnacle of power in 1979. These are Amir Iskandar, *Saddam Husayn, munadilan wa-mufakkiran wa-insanan [Saddam Hussein, the Fighter, the Thinker, and the Man]* (Paris: Hashit, 1980); Fu 'ad Matar, *Saddam Hussein, the Man, the Cause, and the Future*, 1st ed. (London: Third World Centre, 1981).

19 Hal Brands and David Palkki, "Conspiring Bastards: Saddam Hussein's Strategic View of the United States," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 625–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2012.01045.x>. Saddam practiced what Jerrold Post has termed "revolutionary opportunism," which enabled him to reverse course under certain circumstances. Jerrold M. Post, "Saddam Hussein of Iraq: A Political Psychology Profile," *Political Psychology* 12, no. 2 (1991): 282–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791465>.

20 Bengio, *Saddam's Word*, 125–32.

21 CRRC SH-PDWN-D-000-812, "Saddam Hussein Speeches," April 15, 2002.

22 Hal Brands, "Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet: Covert Action and the Contours of United States-Iraq Relations," *The International History Review* 33, no. 3 (2011): 392–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2011.595169>.

23 For a concise overview of Saddam's view of Israel, see Hal Brands, "Saddam and Israel: What Do the New Iraqi Records Reveal?," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 3 (September 2011): 500–520, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2011.599658>. See also Bengio, *Saddam's Word*, 134–39.

entertained the anti-Semitic theory that Jews exercised outsize influence over Western media and finance, enabling them to dictate U.S. policy toward the Middle East.<sup>24</sup> To the very last, Saddam held fast to his conviction that Zionism was the root of the Arab world's rot. All "bad things" that had befallen the Arabs traced back to the Jewish state, he told his American interrogator in 2004. "Everything that happened to us was because of Israel."<sup>25</sup> One might interpret these as the words of a defeated, delusional despot who was desperate to lay blame for his own errors at the feet of his favorite scapegoat. But Saddam's remarks reflect an apparently genuine and remarkably consistent set of convictions dating back to his young adulthood.<sup>26</sup> He took it as an article of faith that Zionist circles worked in tandem with Western imperialists to keep the Arabs in a perpetual state of internecine conflict, economic underdevelopment, and scientific backwardness.<sup>27</sup> Only then could tiny Israel maintain its edge over the numerically superior Arabs. As Saddam proclaimed in 1978, the Arab states had suffered their first defeat at the hands of Israel in 1948 because of the "weakness of the [Arab] regimes ... associated with colonialism."<sup>28</sup> Or, as he put it in early 1990, "The root cause of the loss of Palestine was not the Zionists' faith in their cause, but the Arabs' abandonment of theirs. The root cause was not Zionist strength, but Arab weakness."<sup>29</sup>

Saddam's preoccupation with Arab weakness

vis-à-vis Israel reflected the sense of insecurity — in every sense of the word — that pervaded his politics. Imperialism and Zionism had not merely defeated but *humiliated* the Arab states. Allusions to Arab debasement permeated Saddam's public and private rhetoric, echoing his preoccupation with surmounting the indignities to which imperialists and Zionists had subjected the Arab nation. In 1979, for example, Saddam told the Revolutionary Command Council that the goal of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement was "to make the entire Arab world *kneel down*" before Zionism and the United States.<sup>30</sup> Even if Iraq "bowed" to the Zionists, he said on another occasion, they would never permit the Arabs to achieve scientific and technological parity with Israel.<sup>31</sup> In keeping with the mission of Baathism, Saddam considered it his personal duty and destiny to resurrect the Arab nation — to reclaim their glorious ancient history and redeem their dignity in modern times.<sup>32</sup> "Iraq can make this [Arab] nation rise and can be its center post of its big abode," he told his advisers in the early 1980s. "If Iraq falls, then the entire Arab nation will fall."<sup>33</sup>

The event that shaped Saddam's view of Israel perhaps more than any other during his tenure as president — and, as this article demonstrates, one that would haunt him throughout the year leading up to the invasion of Kuwait — was the Israeli airstrike on the French-built Osirak nuclear reactor

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24 In 1995, for example, Saddam interpreted President Bill Clinton's donning a yarmulke at the funeral of assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as definitive proof that the American president was beholden to Zionism. Clinton "needs the support of the Zionist lobby so they will agree to renew his presidency for four more years," Saddam announced in a meeting with his advisors. Otherwise, "they [Zionists] will come up with rumors about him [Clinton] and imprison him. That is the way Zionism works now in America and in many western countries." Around the same time, Saddam instructed his inner circle to consult *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* — a late-nineteenth-century Russian tract advancing the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that Jews aspire to world domination — to gain a firmer grasp of how Zionism "undercuts progressive movements" worldwide. CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-877, "Meeting with Saddam and His Cabinet regarding the Funeral of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the Effects of His Assassination," undated; CRRC SH-SHTP-A-001-215, "Saddam and His Inner Circle Discuss Zionism and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*," c. mid-1990s.

25 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Interview Session no. 11, March 3, 2004, Electronic Briefing Book (EBB) no. 279, National Security Archive (NSA).

26 Saddam's public diatribes against Israel were little different from his unguarded comments behind closed doors, suggesting that his rhetoric was not merely for public consumption. In this regard, my research confirms the findings of other scholars. See Woods, *The Mother of All Battles*, 32–35; Woods, Palkki, and Stout, "A Survey of Saddam's Audio Files, 1978-2001: Toward an Understanding of Authoritarian Regimes," 75; Brands, "Saddam and Israel," 501–2.

27 For Saddam, "Zionist" did not necessarily connote Israeli or even Jewish. He frequently referred to any American official or politician who supported Israel as a Zionist. In one meeting, Saddam and his advisors intimated that U.N. Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar — a Peruvian Catholic — was a Zionist by virtue of living in New York, "a Jewish city." CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-561, "Saddam and His Inner Circle Discussing the United Nations, the Soviet Union, and the United States," c. April 1988.

28 CRRC SH-PDWN-D-000-341, "Transcript of a Speech Given by Saddam Hussein on 'The Role of the Iraqi Armed Forces in the Arab-Zionist Conflict' at al-Bakr University," June 3, 1978.

29 *Al-Thawra*, February 25, 1990, 2.

30 CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-553, "Revolutionary Command Council Meeting," March 27, 1979. Emphasis added.

31 CRRC SH-SHTP-A-001-039, "Saddam and His Senior Advisors Discussing Israel's Attack on the Tamuz (Osirak) Reactor and Iraqi Civil Defenses," c. June 1981.

32 On Saddam's views of, and relationship with, history, see Bengio, *Saddam's Word*, 163–75; Brands and Palkki, "Conspiring Bastards," 628.

33 CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-626, "Saddam Discussing Neighboring Countries and Their Regimes," c. 1980-1981.



outside Baghdad in 1981.<sup>34</sup> Meeting with his advisers, Saddam framed the attack as a function of Israel's abiding strategy to "prevent the advancement and the rise of the Arab nation, and prevent it from using science and technology."<sup>35</sup> Israel portrayed itself as "nothing but a group of Jews who were subjected to Nazi persecution and are looking for a peaceful land." But in reality, Saddam maintained, the Zionist movement was "a focal point of aggression and hostility and expansion" imposed upon the Middle East "for the purpose of subjugating the Arab nation."<sup>36</sup>

If the strike on the Osirak reactor confirmed that Israel would brook no challenge to its scientific supremacy, the Iran-Contra affair appeared to validate Saddam's suspicions of U.S. duplicity.<sup>37</sup> The White House's ill-conceived scheme to leverage the release of American hostages with secret arms sales to Tehran at the height of the Iran-Iraq War only confirmed what Saddam had feared all along: For all the public rancor between Washington and the Islamic revolutionaries in Tehran, the U.S. government continued to collude with Iran at the expense of Iraq, as they had done since the early 1970s. The scandal was "like a nightmare coming true," said Latif Nussayif Jassem, Iraq's minister of media and culture.<sup>38</sup> Saddam concurred, reminding his inner circle to bear in mind that "America has two faces." Eager to unearth Zionist plotting behind every setback, however, Saddam also appeared willing to give Reagan the benefit of the doubt. "The Jews work for Iran's interests," he told the Revolutionary Command Council. "Even Reagan, if he insisted on conflict with Iran, it is possible that the Jews would not agree with him." Zionism "*made* Reagan agree" to sell Iran arms. "It is *Zionism* that has elevated matters to this height so that Reagan would agree and all three of them [Israel, Iran, and the United States] would sit down and conspire

against Iraq."<sup>39</sup> In Saddam's telling, Reagan did not betray Iraq of his own volition, but was *compelled* to do so. Such was the extent of the sway the Iraqi leadership believed Zionism held over the American presidency.

His conviction that Israel exercised nefarious influence over the U.S. government, his abiding wariness of Zionist and imperialist plots to subvert his regime, his dream to redeem the Arabs from centuries of humiliation — all these facets of Saddam's worldview would coalesce in late 1989, coloring his interpretation of U.S. foreign policy at the end of the Cold War and the perils awaiting Iraq in a world transformed.

### **Uncertain Embrace: January–October 1989**

When Bush entered office in January 1989, relations with Iraq were low on his list of priorities. Gauging the sincerity of Gorbachev's reforms, maintaining the trans-Atlantic alliance, and resolving a range of "regional issues" in the Third World assumed pride of place on the new president's agenda. Even in the realm of Middle East policy, it was the administration's efforts to launch an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, not relations with Iraq, that took precedence.<sup>40</sup> In the words of Richard Haass, director for Middle Eastern affairs on the National Security Council, "Iraq was barely on the radar (literal or figurative) of any midlevel much less senior official" during Bush's first year in office.<sup>41</sup>

That Bush and his advisers initially ascribed so little importance to Iraq reflected their confidence that the policy they inherited from the Reagan administration was sound. Though officially neutral in the Iran-Iraq War, the United States had "tilted" toward Baghdad since the early 1980s in efforts to

34 "Osirak" is a compound of Osiris (the Egyptian god of fertility and death) and Irak (the French spelling of Iraq). Iraq renamed the reactor "Tammuz," Arabic for July, the month in which the 1968 revolution took place. Although some sources refer to the reactor as Tammuz, this article uses the more common Osirak. On the Israeli airstrike, see Brands, "Saddam and Israel," 505–7.

35 CRRC SH-SHTP-A-001-039, "Saddam and His Senior Advisors Discussing Israel's Attack on the Tamuz (Osirak) Reactor and Iraqi Civil Defenses," c. June 1981.

36 Ibid.

37 Brands, "Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet," 395–401; Brands and Palkki, "Conspiring Bastards," 640–45.

38 CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-556, "Saddam Discussing 'Irangate' (Iran-Contra) Revelations with His Inner Circle," n.d. (c. 1986).

39 CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-561, "Saddam and His Inner Circle Discussing the United Nations, the Soviet Union, and the United States," c. April 1988. Emphasis added.

40 James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: GP Putnam's Sons, 1995), 115–33; William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 291–99; Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 217–18, 226–33; Richard Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 38–45.

41 Haass, *War of Necessity*, 44. As Karabell and Zelikow write, "Iraq was not even among the top five regional priorities for Middle East specialists in the Bush administration. The Arab-Israeli peace process, the U.S. hostages in Lebanon, the volatile situation in Afghanistan after the Soviet pull-out, and the simmering crisis between India and Pakistan all ranked well above Iraq in importance." Ernest R. May et al., *Dealing with Dictators: Dilemmas of U.S. Diplomacy and Intelligence Analysis, 1945-1990*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 182.



contain the fundamentalist revolutionaries in Tehran, fracture Baghdad's already tenuous relationship with the Soviet Union, and entice Saddam to join the fold of the "moderate," Western-oriented Arab states.<sup>42</sup> To those ends, Reagan had courted Baghdad with high-technology exports, intelligence cooperation, and economic assistance, including \$3.2 billion in credit guarantees to purchase American agricultural goods under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Commodity Credit Corporation.<sup>43</sup> In 1987, Reagan had also undertaken Operation Earnest Will to "reflag" Kuwaiti tankers under threat from Iranian attack — a move intended not only to ensure the free flow of oil in the Gulf, but also to signal continued U.S. support for Iraq after the Iran-Contra debacle.<sup>44</sup> Even Saddam's chemical weapons attacks against Iraqi Kurds in 1988 had not altered the outgoing Reagan administration's calculations. Human rights abuses "are a built-in constraint on our ability to promote a closer bilateral relationship," read one widely circulated State Department memorandum. Nevertheless, "in many respects our political and economic interests run parallel with those of Iraq." Baghdad was poised to continue purchasing a billion dollars' worth of American agricultural products per year, and the postwar Iraqi market promised to be a boon for U.S. firms. Geopolitically, wrangling Iraq into "the grouping of conservative Arab states" would help create a new "center of gravity" in the Arab world, countering that of revolutionary Libya and Syria.<sup>45</sup> By every measure, Iraq was too important to alienate.

Bush's advisers upheld this logic, advising him to maintain Reagan's policy of constructive engagement with Baghdad — warts and all. The war with Iran "may have changed Iraq from a radical state challenging the system to a more responsible, status-quo state working within the system," Bush's

transition team optimistically predicted. Saddam's desperation for American trade and investment offered a golden opportunity "to wean Iraq away from its already tenuous political alignment with the Soviets" and "rope Iraq into a conservative and responsible alignment in foreign policy." Human rights concerns should not be shelved, but nor should they dictate the course of the U.S.-Iraqi relationship.<sup>46</sup> In October 1989, the new administration enshrined these principles in National Security Directive 26, a product of its formal review of U.S. policy toward the Persian Gulf.<sup>47</sup> Formulated at a time of swelling upheaval across the Eastern bloc, the unremarkable document garnered little interest in the White House.<sup>48</sup>

If Iraq was peripheral to the new Bush administration, the United States loomed large in Saddam's thinking. Initially, the Iraqi leadership was uncertain what to make of the new U.S. president. Reagan had gone out of his way to persuade the Iraqi government that "Irangate" was an aberration, not part of a grand design to cultivate Iran at Iraq's expense. But the arrival of a new administration could augur new policies.<sup>49</sup> Ever fearful that Washington might sacrifice Baghdad on the altar of rapprochement with Tehran, Saddam put his best face forward to convince the Bush administration that Iraq would remain a reliable political and economic partner. In February 1989, he announced that the Iraqi government was preparing a new constitution to legalize a multiparty system, guarantee free elections, and ensure freedom of the press. That same month, Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz informed the U.S. embassy that Saddam wanted a "clean, clear start" with the new administration.<sup>50</sup> As a token of its good faith, Iraq agreed to pay a generous sum as compensation for the 37 American sailors killed by an Iraqi fighter pilot who mistook the USS *Stark* for an Iranian tanker in 1987.<sup>51</sup>

42 On the U.S. "tilt," see Jentleson, *With Friends like These*, 33–55; Kenneth R. Timmerman, *The Death Lobby: How the West Armed Iraq* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991); Peter L. Hahn, *Missions Accomplished?: The United States and Iraq since World War I* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 3, esp. 69–70, 76–78.

43 Memo to Secretary Shultz, "U.S. Policy Toward Iraqi CW Use," September 13, 1988, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA).

44 George Pratt Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), 925–35; Brands, "Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet," 398–99; Brands and Palkki, "Conspiring Bastards," 644.

45 "Overview of U.S.-Iraqi Relations and Potential Pressure Points," September 9, 1988, DNSA.

46 "Guidelines for U.S.-Iraq Policy," c. January 20, 1989, DNSA.

47 National Security Directive 26, October 2, 1989, 1, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library (BPL), <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd26.pdf>. The thrust of National Security Directive 26 was reiterated in a CIA assessment a month later: "Despite its position as a regional military powerhouse and its growing oil clout, Iraq will pursue a relatively restrained foreign policy in the region over the next three years while it recovers from the war with Iran." National Intelligence Estimate, "Iraq: Foreign Policy of a Major Regional Power," November 1989, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, CREST CIA-RDP94T00766R000300180003-7.

48 Haass, *War of Necessity*, 48.

49 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 144–45.

50 Wilson to State, "Testing the Iraqis," June 29, 1989, DNSA.

51 Baghdad to Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), "Iraq/U.S. Relations: USS Stark," April 12, 1989, FCO 8/7508 f1, The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London, United Kingdom; FCO Research Department, "Iraq/U.S. Relations," April 12, 1989, FCO 8/7508 f3, TNA.

**DID WASHINGTON TRULY SEEK  
CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONS WITH  
BAGHDAD, OR WOULD THE BUSH  
ADMINISTRATION DOUBLE-CROSS  
IRAQ IN PURSUIT OF AMERICAN  
HEGEMONY OVER THE GULF?**



At the same time, Iraq put out feelers to gauge the new U.S. president's intentions. In March, Saddam dispatched Nizar Hamdun, the under-secretary of the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, to convey his wishes for warmer relations directly to Bush's advisers in Washington. Having served as ambassador to the United States at the height of the war with Iran, no Iraqi official was better equipped to deliver Saddam's message of friendship than the highly regarded Hamdun. At the State Department, he received Secretary of State James Baker's assurances that, despite lingering hostility in Congress over the regime's earlier use of chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds, the Bush administration was eager to continue cultivating closer relations with Iraq.<sup>52</sup> Hamdun inferred from his meeting with Baker that the U.S. government recognized Iraq as a regional power — one that could be counted on to resolve problems of mutual concern in the greater Middle East. Baker's warm words also convinced the Iraqi leadership that Bush and his inner circle were less ideological and more pragmatic than their predecessors in the Reagan administration. This was an administration with which they could do business.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, business was top of mind for the leadership in Baghdad. Beyond its astronomical human toll, the war with Iran had devastated the Iraqi economy. In the early 1980s, when plummeting oil revenues and international reserves proved insufficient to finance the war effort, Saddam had turned to Western creditors and friendly Arab states for relief. By war's end, Iraq's total external debt stood at an estimated \$26 billion, not including an additional \$40–50 billion of "debts in kind" to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states.<sup>54</sup> In this context, Saddam understood that fruitful economic relations with the United States were vital to resurrecting the Iraqi economy. In June 1989, the U.S.-Iraq Business Forum — a trade association whose influence had grown in tandem with the flourishing bilateral trade relationship — sponsored a delegation of 25 American chief executive officers

to visit Iraq and survey trade and investment opportunities in the postwar economy. To their delight, Saddam personally received the visitors for a cordial two-hour meeting. That the Iraqi president granted the delegation an unprecedented personal audience "constituted a deliberate signal of willingness to do business with Americans," Glaspie reported to Washington. More shocking still was Saddam's statement that he had put his suspicions of American intentions behind him. "Our decision to cooperate with you is solid," he told his visitors. "We remember Irangate, but we are more interested in looking ahead."<sup>55</sup>

To be sure, the burgeoning U.S.-Iraqi relationship was not without tensions. As the summer of 1989 came to an end, three issues loomed on the horizon. The first was the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro affair. In August 1989, the FBI discovered that the bank's Atlanta branch had provided Iraq with \$4 billion in unauthorized loans, which Baghdad then used to purchase sensitive military equipment. Because the bank was responsible for issuing a large proportion of U.S. government-backed loans to Iraq for the purchase of American agricultural commodities, the Department of Agriculture and other federal agencies decided to disburse Iraq's next \$1 billion of Commodity Credit Corporation credits in two \$500-million tranches: the first in October 1989, and the second sometime in early 1990, pending the results of the investigation into Banca Nazionale del Lavoro's anomalous lending practices.<sup>56</sup> The second issue was Saddam's incipient fear of hostile Israeli intentions toward his regime. On multiple occasions since the end of the war with Iran, authorities in Baghdad publicly and privately had voiced concerns that Israel was secretly planning to repeat the 1981 airstrike on the Osirak nuclear reactor, this time against other nuclear or unconventional weapons installations.<sup>57</sup> The third issue was that Saddam began receiving reports that the United States was spreading rumors that Iraq harbored hostile intentions toward its Arab neighbors in the Gulf. According to one Iraqi account, Saudi

52 Memo to Baker, "Meeting with Iraqi Under Secretary Nizar Hamdun," March 24, 1989, DNSA.

53 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 145–49. Baker, for his part, came to the meeting seeking to mollify Iraqi fears that the United States intended to "improve relations with Iran at Iraq's expense." See "Meeting with Iraqi Under Secretary Nizar Hamdun," March 23, 1989, DNSA.

54 USDA, "Financial and Economic Report on Iraq," April 21, 1988, DNSA; USDA, "Iraq—Financial and Economic Situation," July 14, 1989, DNSA.

55 Glaspie to State, "US-Iraq Business Forum: Meeting with Saddam Hussein," June 11, 1989, DNSA. See also Baghdad to FCO, "Iraq-United States Trade Relations," June 22, 1989, FCO 8/7508 f6, TNA.

56 On the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro scandal, see Jentleson, *With Friends like These*, 123–38; May et al., *Dealing with Dictators*, 179–85.

57 The Iraqis conveyed their fears of an Israeli attack in September 1988, January 1989, April 1989, and July-August 1989. Israeli authorities informed their British and American interlocutors that Iraqi aircraft had conducted exercises deep inside Jordanian airspace, which prompted the Israelis to conduct their own exercises over Jordan. The Iraqis, for their part, accused Israel of using alleged Iraqi threats to deflect attention from the *intifada* and the Baker's efforts to launch an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. See Baghdad to FCO, "Reported Israeli Threat to Iraq," January 19, 1989, FCO 8/8497 f1, TNA; Baghdad to FCO, "Iraq/Israel," April 10, 1989, FCO 8/8497 f5, TNA; Baghdad to FCO, "Iraq/Israel," April 24, 1989, FCO 8/8497 f6, TNA; FCO to Baghdad, "Iraq/Israel," July 6, 1989, FCO 8/8497 f7, TNA; Washington to FCO, "Iraq/Israel," July 13, 1989, FCO 8/8497 f10, TNA; Tel Aviv to FCO, "Israel/Iraq," August 24, 1989, FCO 8/8497 f11, TNA.



Arabia's King Fahd informed Baghdad that a U.S. official encouraged Riyadh to beware the dangers posed by Iraqi armed forces. The Iraqi government believed that the commander of U.S. Central Command, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, peddled similar rumors during his October visits to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>58</sup>

Did Washington truly seek constructive relations with Baghdad, or would the Bush administration double-cross Iraq in pursuit of American hegemony over the Gulf? In October, Aziz put these questions directly to Baker in an otherwise cordial meeting in Washington. Iraq had received "disturbing" reports that U.S. officials were peddling rumors that Iraq harbored aggressive intentions toward its Gulf neighbors, Aziz told Baker. Baghdad had also learned that "some American agencies" were "trying to destabilize Iraq."<sup>59</sup> The accusations surprised Baker, who reassured Aziz that "the United States is not involved in any effort to weaken or destabilize Iraq."<sup>60</sup> Privately, the secretary shrugged off the foreign minister's inquiries as little more than an exercise in conspiracy theorizing. "This was my first direct exposure to the paranoia that I would later learn permeated the upper echelons of the Iraqi government," Baker recalled years later.<sup>61</sup>

Far from a bout of paranoia, Aziz's line of questioning was, in fact, part and parcel of the ongoing debate inside the Iraqi government over American intentions. In September, for example, Saddam and his two half-brothers, Barzan and Sabawi Ibrahim al Tikriti, exchanged a series of messages pondering the same questions that Aziz would put to Baker the following month. Consensus eluded them, suggesting that, as of the fall of 1989, the Iraqi leadership was not of one mind regarding the future of their relationship with the United States — and certainly had no plans to wage a new war. On the one hand, Barzan, head of the Iraqi mission to the United Nations in Geneva, was pessimistic. "The real danger is the United States

and its follower Israel. The Americans want to control the region and we are the only obstacle in front of them." By stoking fears of Iraq's supposed hostility toward its neighbors, Washington was angling to "alienate us from the rest of the Arab world." Worse still, "Israel is seriously thinking of dragging us into war *while they know that we are cautious ...* by means of launching a strike against one of our establishments." On the other hand, Sabawi, director of Iraqi General Intelligence, was more sanguine. The United States was certainly a potential adversary, Sabawi wrote in response to Barzan, but "America has no interest to have Iraq as an enemy [as long as] Iraq does not interfere with its [U.S.] vital interests." As for Israel, Sabawi added, "I think it is taking a cautious defensive posture rather than a posture of an aggressor. If Israel has the intention to strike at any target or project in Iraq, it would be for a limited objective to slow the progress of the project and avoid the threat for a longer period of time, rather than the objective of changing the regime."<sup>62</sup>

### **The End of History on the Euphrates: November 1989–February 1990**

As their internal deliberations suggest, Iraq's leaders feared Israeli intentions and certainly saw the potential for American treachery, but they perceived their relationship with the Bush administration as largely sound in the early fall of 1989. Over the coming months, however, the global repercussions of the Eastern bloc revolutions and Soviet retrenchment inadvertently exacerbated Iraq's suspicions of America's and Israel's intentions in ways that the Bush administration neither anticipated nor appreciated. Not unlike their U.S., European, and Soviet counterparts, Saddam and his advisers understood that the geopolitical certainties of the past 40 years were fast vanishing before their eyes. But if the bipolar Cold War was becoming a

58 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 138–41; Wafiq Samarrai, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya wa-haqa'iq 'an al-zaman al-sayyi' fi al-'Iraq: qira'a jadida fi harbay al-Khalij al-ula wa-l-thaniyya [The Destruction of the Eastern Gate and Facts About the Bad Times in Iraq: A New Reading on the First and Second Gulf Wars]* (Kuwait: Sharikat Dar al-Qabas lil-Sihafah wa-al-Nashr, 1997), 316–17. In Schwarzkopf's telling, the Kuwaitis divulged their fears of Iraqi hostility without any American prompting. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero: General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the Autobiography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 282–83.

59 State to Embassy Baghdad, "Secretary's October 6 Meeting with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz," October 13, 1989, James A. Baker III Papers, Box 108, Folder 10, Princeton University.

60 State to Embassy Baghdad, "Message from the Secretary to Tariq Aziz," October 21, 1989, DNSA. According to Bazzaz, Aziz believed that Baker's response was sincere. Given that the Iran-Contra affair had been organized without the knowledge of Baker's predecessor at the State Department, however, Aziz feared that the CIA might still be scheming behind the secretary of state's back. Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 156.

61 Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 265. Retrospectively, Baker perceptively recognized that "Saddam saw in Soviet decline the danger of a 'unipolar moment,' a period when the United States would be the only superpower." He continued: "That is certainly one explanation for his paranoid statements in the late spring and early summer of 1990, and in his earlier charges, that the CIA was attempting to destabilize his regime. He may not, unfortunately, have been the focus of our attention, but we were certainly the center of his." *Ibid.*, 365.

62 CRRC SH-PDWN-D-000-469, "Letters from Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti and Sabawi Ibrahim al-Tikriti to Saddam Hussein," September 1989. Emphasis added. See also Woods, *The Mother of All Battles*, 42–43. Saddam's reply to these letters — if one exists — is not included in the document.

relic of history, the contours of a post-Cold War order remained hazy in the fog of upheaval. As Saddam confided to Jordan's King Hussein, "We should be vigilant and cautious during this period ... while the world takes its new shape."<sup>63</sup>

In a speech delivered on Nov. 7, 1989 — coincidentally, just two days before the Berlin Wall came tumbling down — Saddam publicly offered a preliminary interpretation of how the collapse of communism might impinge upon the Middle East. According to Saddam, two trends would define the course of global affairs in the near future: the first was rising global — and particularly American — dependence on Persian Gulf oil; the second, retrenchment across the communist world. "These two phenomena will have grave consequences for our region," he warned, for they raised the likelihood of foreign "plundering" (*nahb*) of Gulf oil in the coming five years.<sup>64</sup> Not for the last time, Saddam conflated his fear of American designs on the Persian Gulf with Soviet decline, exacerbating suspicions of U.S. intentions that were already germinating in the upper echelons of the Iraqi government.

Although Saddam's speech — and, as the British embassy in Baghdad put it, his "implication that the U.S. may be prepared to act more aggressively in the Middle East to protect these [oil] interests" — was little noted in the United States, it had been inspired by two seemingly innocuous American actions. First, in late October, former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger had written an op-ed in the *Washington Post* warning that the world "has grown increasingly and perhaps excessively dependent on the gulf region for its energy resources." As a result, "the principal nations of the region" would become not only "far more influential," but also "more tempting as a target."<sup>65</sup> The op-ed caught the eye of senior officials in the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, who apparently passed it along to Saddam.<sup>66</sup> Second, around the same time, Glaspie

pointedly asked her Iraqi interlocutors why they maintained so large a standing army even after the war with Iran had ended. Glaspie's tactless comment was relayed up to Saddam. This, too, aroused his suspicions, coming as it did on the heels of reports that the United States was spreading rumors of Iraq's hostile intentions toward its neighbors.<sup>67</sup>

Iraq's anxieties about America's intentions grew in tandem with the accelerating pace of the Eastern bloc revolutions. In December, likely in response to the popular Romanian uprising against Nicolae Ceaușescu that month, Saddam ordered Iraq's ambassadors in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, and Cuba to return to Baghdad for a discussion of the upheaval sweeping the communist world.<sup>68</sup> Their deliberations revolved around one overarching question: How would Iraq fare in the absence of a bipolar world order? The attendees reached some ominous conclusions. If Gorbachev had surrendered hegemony over the Soviet Union's traditional sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, surely he would not hesitate to sacrifice friends in the Middle East, too. Moscow's turn inward also threatened to give Washington control over the U.N. Security Council, where the Soviet Union had kept American imperialism in check for the past 45 years. The United States might now use its unrestrained power to assert hegemony over the Persian Gulf oil on which its future economic competitors, Japan and Europe, depended.<sup>69</sup>

Also in attendance were Saad al Bazzaz, editor of *al-Jumhuriyya* newspaper and director of Iraqi radio and television, and Salah al Mukhtar, a longtime Iraqi journalist, diplomat, and confidant of Saddam. Bazzaz offered an interpretation of the dramatic events unfolding around the world that, as the following section demonstrates, would seem prescient come early 1990. From Eastern Europe to China, the masses had taken to the streets to challenge the legitimacy of their governments.

63 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 28. As Saddam told his FBI interrogator in 2004, the bipolar order was "better than now," i.e., the post-Cold War era. During the Cold War, there had been a predictable "balance of power." "With the collapse of this balance, however, the United States was left alone as the sole superpower." FBI, Interview Session no. 9, February 24, 2004, EBB no. 279, NSA.

64 The text of Saddam's address is printed in *al-Thawra*, November 8, 1990, 8.

65 James Schlesinger, "So Hungry for Oil: OPEC's Best Friend? It's Us," *Washington Post*, October 24, 1990, A25.

66 Baghdad to FCO, "U.S./Iraqi Relations," November 17, 1989, FCO 8/7508 f11, TNA. Hamdun passed a copy of Schlesinger's op-ed directly to the British ambassador.

67 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 137–41; Wafiq Samarrai, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya wa-haqaiq 'an al-zaman al-sayyi' fi al-'Iraq: qira'a jadida fi harbay al-Khalij al-ula wa-l-thaniyya [The Destruction of the Eastern Gate and Facts About the Bad Times in Iraq: A New Reading on the First and Second Gulf Wars]* (Kuwait: Sharikat Dar al-Qabas lil-Sihafah wa-al-Nashr, 1997), 316–17.

68 Until December 1989, Ceaușescu had managed to evade the wave of popular upheaval that brought down other communist regimes. His violent downfall evidently came as a shock to Saddam, who reportedly ordered his intelligence services to study footage of the Romanian uprising so as to avoid a similar fate. Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 31.

69 CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-930, "Dialogues between Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Ambassadors, and Journalists in Foreign Countries," December 1989; Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 390–93. Unfortunately, the transcript of this meeting is only partial. Bazzaz writes at p. 390 that this meeting occurred in the fall of 1989, but the transcript of the same meeting indicates that it took place in December 1989. The latter is likely correct: Saddam references Romanian protests, which did not erupt until then. Otherwise, Bazzaz's recollections of the meeting appear to correspond with the transcript.

Bazzaz believed that Israel would attempt to “transfer” this crisis to the Middle East in hopes of inspiring popular unrest and delegitimizing its adversaries in the Arab world — Iraq chief among them. Mukhtar, for his part, argued that Iraq, with all its technological, industrial, and human potential, posed the greatest obstacle to Zionist plans to make Israel the “center of gravity” in the Middle East. It was for this reason that Israel had struck the Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 and lent covert support to Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War. Now, Israel was racing to win new allies in a democratizing Eastern Europe. This would enable the Zionists and their new supporters to “cooperate with Iran” and “surround and isolate Iraq.”<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, as 1989 drew to a close, Saddam’s apprehension about communist retrenchment intermingled with resurgent fears that Israel was on the precipice of launching a preemptive strike on Iraq. Raad Majid al Hamdani, a general in the elite Republican Guard, recalled rumors in late 1989 that Israel was planning to bomb dams along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers to flood Baghdad.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Wafiq al Samarrai, then deputy director of military intelligence, later wrote that in early 1990 the Iraqi intelligence community began receiving a “torrent of warnings” from Saddam’s office that Israel intended to strike Iraq’s nuclear reactors and biological and chemical weapons facilities. Samarrai later claimed that he was skeptical of the credibility of these warnings, which he believed — possibly correctly — originated with the Palestine Liberation Organization. However, fearing reprisal, he did not refute them.<sup>72</sup>

That warnings of an Israeli attack resurfaced in December 1989 was almost certainly related to Iraq’s test launch of a new rocket system that month. The Iraqi government insisted that the

rocket would be used for peaceful ends — carrying satellites into space — but American analysts warned that the test signaled Iraq’s progress toward indigenous production of a three-stage intermediate-range ballistic missile.<sup>73</sup> In response to the launch, the State Department expressed its concern over the “destabilizing effects” of missile proliferation in the Middle East.<sup>74</sup> In a speech before the Knesset, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin warned that Iraq was “devoting huge resources to the development of weapons that are among the most sophisticated and could give it long-range capability.”<sup>75</sup> Saddam, in turn, derided the “double standards” of his American and Israeli critics, who spoke “as if science and knowledge are the preserve of certain states, and as if independence and the right to exercise sovereignty are valid only for the other countries of the world and the enemies of the Arabs, but not for the Arabs.” He cautioned that “[a]ny attempt by the Zionist entity to strike our scientific or military facilities will be confronted with a precise response, with all means available to us, in accordance with the legitimate right to self-defense.”<sup>76</sup> The leading Iraqi daily, *al-Thawra*, doubled down on Saddam’s warning, editorializing that Israel “must realize what was possible in 1981” — that is, the Osirak strike — “is no longer possible in 1990.”<sup>77</sup>

As 1990 began, another consequence of the end of the Cold War, mass Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel, inadvertently intensified Saddam’s fears of an Israeli attack. The plight of Soviet Jewry had been the centerpiece of American human rights advocacy since the 1970s, and, as a matter of Cold War policy, the U.S. government granted automatic refugee status to the relatively few Soviet Jews whom Moscow permitted to emigrate. But in the late 1980s, as Gorbachev’s liberal reforms triggered

70 Ibid.

71 Raad Majid Hamdani, *Qabla an yughadiruna al-tarikh [Before History Leaves Us]* (Beirut: Al-Dar al-‘Arabiyya li-l-‘Ulum, 2007), 191–92.

72 Samarrai, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya*, 365. Evidence suggests that Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization played some role in nurturing Saddam’s fear of an Israeli preemptive strike. In May 1990, for example, the Omani sultan informed the British ambassador in Muscat that Arafat was responsible for “work[ing] up the Iraqis’ fear about an Israeli attack.” Muscat to FCO, “Arab Summit: UK/Iraq,” May 16, 1990, FCO 8/8153 f22, TNA.

73 Clarke and Mulholland to Baker, “Iraqi Launch of Large, New Type [of] Rocket,” December 5, 1989, DNSA. In his memoirs, Hamdani writes that “an American economic institution with close ties to the Bush administration” had arranged a meeting with Saddam in late 1989 to negotiate a “long-term strategic economic agreement” between Iraq and the United States. After the test missile launch, however, the American side abruptly speculated that the Iraqi test was a response to Israel’s successful reinforced Saddam’s suspicions that the United States viewed Iraq as a threat, not a partner. Hamdani, *Qabla an yughadiruna al-tarikh*, 192.

74 Carlyle Murphy and David B. Ottaway, “Iraq Has Tested Satellite Rocket, U.S. Confirms,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/12/09/iraq-has-tested-satellite-rocket-us-confirms/8cc1eefd-398e-4ea6-a584-3b3736961c1c/>. Some speculated that the Iraqi test was a response to Israel’s successful launch of its first intelligence satellite in September 1988. “The Shadow of Arab Missiles,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 13, 1989, 4.

75 David Makovsky, “Rabin: Huge Iraq Missile Advances,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 21, 1989, 1. Privately, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens informed European Community ambassadors in Tel Aviv that the Israelis were increasingly alarmed by Iraq’s scientific advances. Tel Aviv to FCO, “EC Lunch with Arens, 20 December,” December 21, 1989, FCO 8/8497 f13, TNA.

76 *Al-Thawra*, January 6, 3–4.

77 *Al-Thawra*, January 8, 1, 15.



the exodus of Soviet Jews, what seemed a monumental Cold War human rights victory suddenly introduced a new dilemma: With the American immigration system already straining under the weight of ongoing refugee crises in Southeast Asia and Central America, the U.S. government could ill afford to absorb the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews projected to emigrate in the years ahead.<sup>78</sup> To avert this scenario, the Bush administration in late 1989 quietly revoked Soviet Jews' presumptive refugee status and capped the number permitted to enter the country through regular immigration channels. These measures, taken more for mundane budgetary than political reasons, had the effect of redirecting the flow of migration to Israel by early 1990.<sup>79</sup>

This latest wave of Jewish immigration, or *aliyah*, was a boon for Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir of the right-wing Likud Party. In a speech on Jan. 14, an ebullient Shamir proclaimed that "big immigration requires Israel to be big as well." Israel needed the "space [i.e., the occupied territories] to house all the people" projected to arrive from the Soviet Union in the years ahead. In a thinly veiled jab at his rivals in the Labor party, which had long argued that higher Palestinian birth rates made Israeli designs on the West Bank and Gaza untenable, Shamir added: "Just when many among us were

saying that time is working against us, time has brought us this *aliyah* and has solved everything."<sup>80</sup>

The new Soviet *aliyah*, coupled with Shamir's implication that it would enable Israel to retain the occupied territories, triggered nothing short of panic across the Arab Middle East. Soviet immigration could presage "a new historical catastrophe

## SADDAM IMPRESSED UPON HIS GUESTS THAT THE END OF THE COLD WAR MADE IT ALL THE MORE IMPORTANT TO TACKLE THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN IMPASSE.

[*nakba*] for the Arabs," editorialized Egypt's paper of record, *al-Ahram*. Unless Moscow conditioned Jewish emigration on Israeli pledges not to resettle the new immigrants in the occupied territories, "Arabs and Palestinians would be the first in the Third World to pay the price for perestroika and glasnost."<sup>81</sup> Similarly, an editorial in *al-Thawra* declared that "we [Arabs] refuse to be the first to pay the price for international détente."<sup>82</sup> During their visit to Moscow, leaders of the Iraqi General Confederation of Trade Unions appealed to their Soviet hosts not to fulfill "Soviet human rights ... at the expense of Palestinian human rights."<sup>83</sup> Saddam, too, was taken with the immigration issue. In mid-January, he devoted almost an hour of his meeting with visiting U.S. congressmen to the question of Soviet

78 For all the Western publicity showered upon the "refuseniks" — i.e., Soviet Jews barred from emigrating to Israel — in the 1970s and 1980s, a majority of Soviet Jewish emigrants preferred to resettle in the United States. To varying degrees since 1968, Soviet authorities had permitted select Jewish citizens to emigrate to Israel under the guise of family reunification. In the absence of direct routes from the Soviet Union to Tel Aviv, they traveled to the Jewish state by way of Vienna. In 1971, however, a fraction of these emigrants rebelled: While transiting the Austrian capital, they relinquished their Israeli immigrant visas, choosing to seek refuge in the United States instead. The "dropouts" (*noshrim*), as the Israelis called them, traveled on from Vienna to Rome, where the U.S. embassy granted Soviet Jews presumptive refugee status. Initially, the dropouts represented just a tiny fraction of the Soviet Jewish emigrant population. Of the 13,022 Jews allowed to exit the Soviet Union in 1971, just 312 — less than 3 percent — chose the United States over Israel. But over the next five years, the dropout rate steadily grew, surpassing 50 percent by 1976 and reaching nearly 75 percent by 1987. In the first seven months of 1989 alone, 30,196 Jews were permitted to emigrate. Of those, over 97 percent dropped out to seek refugee status in the United States by way of Rome. For data on Soviet Jewish emigration from 1971 through July 1989, see Appendix 21, U.S. House of Representatives, *Processing of Soviet Refugees: Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 101st Congress, 1st Session, September 14, 1989, Serial No. 54 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 210. On the dropout phenomenon more broadly, see Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 356–60; Gregg A. Beyer, "The Evolving United States Response to Soviet Jewish Emigration," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 3, no. 1 (1991): 33–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/3.1.30>.

79 The Bush administration began devising the new policy in April 1989. As the Immigration and Naturalization Service commissioner testified before Congress that month, the United States should continue to demand Soviet respect for human rights, but "we must realize that we cannot assimilate all Soviets that may wish to immigrate into the U.S." Testimony of Alan C. Nelson, INS Commissioner, in U.S. House of Representatives, *Soviet Refugees: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 101st Congress, 1st Session, April 6, 1989, Serial No. 12 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 115. Bush unveiled the new policy in a joint hearing before the House Foreign Affairs and Judiciary Committees in September 1990. See U.S. House of Representatives, *Processing of Soviet Refugees*, 2–20. The policy was formally adopted as National Security Directive 27, "Soviet Emigration Policy," October 2, 1989, BPL, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd27.pdf>.

80 "Shamir: We Need the Areas to Settle Soviet Immigrants," *Jerusalem Post*, January 15, 1990, 1. To be sure, Shamir's words were not entirely out of the ordinary. The Likud was the progeny of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of the Revisionist Zionist movement, which never made a secret of its aspiration to control all of *Eretz Yisrael* — not only the territory of pre-1967 Israel, but also the West Bank (which it called by the biblical names Judea and Samaria) and Gaza.

81 "Bayanat al-tandid la tafki," *al-Ahram*, February 2, 1990, 3; "Nahw nakba jadida!" *al-Ahram*, February 4, 1990, 6.

82 "Al-mukhattat al-sahyuniyy wa-l-dawr al-amirkiyy," *al-Thawra*, February 4, 1990, 2.

83 "Taqrir ifad," May 8, 1990, Baath Regional Command Collection (BRCC), Box 01\_2093\_0000\_0269-0270, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

Jewish immigration and America's hand in promoting it.<sup>84</sup> During a visit to Cairo later that month, Saddam told reporters that the arrival of so many new Israelis would only strengthen the hand of Zionist "zealots" (*muta'assibin*) bent on "expansion" and "aggression."<sup>85</sup>

That Israel had become Saddam's chief preoccupation by early 1990 was on full display in his mid-February meeting with John Kelly, a career diplomat then serving as Bush's assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. In keeping with the administration's policy of constructive engagement with Iraq, Kelly traveled to Baghdad to reassure Saddam that the United States was "committed to the relationship for the long haul."<sup>86</sup> He also hoped to have "some straight talk" with the Iraqi leadership about Baker's ongoing campaign to launch an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue as a precursor to elections in the occupied territories. "Saddam is still woefully trapped by lack of information, in part because he sees so few outsiders," wrote Kelly's staff ahead of his visit to Baghdad. "His information on American policy towards the Arab-Israeli peace process is provided [to] him by Arabs — especially by Arafat, his more frequent visitor."<sup>87</sup>

Alongside Glaspie, Kelly met with Saddam and Aziz on February 12. It was the Iraqi president's first face-to-face encounter with a high-ranking Bush administration official. Glaspie had expected Saddam to concentrate on Iraq's ongoing peace negotiations with Iran, which, in her opinion, were "undoubtedly far and away the most grave [sic] national security issue which he faces." But to her surprise, she discovered that "Saddam rather unusually wanted to focus on the larger question of the Arab-Israeli peace process." Saddam impressed upon his guests that the end of the Cold War made it all the more important to tackle the Israeli-Palestinian impasse. With the Soviets in retreat, the United States no longer had any justification for turning a blind eye to Israeli "arrogance," nor could the Americans disregard Palestinian rights any longer. "Regardless of the size of the immigration by which the Israelis seek to provoke the Arabs to act against them," Saddam said, referring to the nascent Soviet *aliyah*, Israel was destined to remain a minority vis-à-vis the Arabs, and a minority "cannot live in peace unless it becomes

peaceful." This raised the question: "Does the USG [U.S. government] want an honorable peace or rather to help Israel through the difficult period of the intifada[?]" Saddam asked, referring to the popular Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation that had broken out in 1987. "Had I been a USG official, I would have had a broader view of U.S. interests. I would have encouraged the intifada in one way or the other and would have warned Israel against the future [prospect of] Iraqi missiles." Saddam concluded with an enigmatic observation:

But perhaps the USG regards regional stability as less crucial and not deserving of solution during the next five years, when the Soviets are busy internally. Five years on, there will be a new situation and you will lose some of the factors of your current strength. Now, the U.S. spearheads an important bloc against a diminishing bloc. Young men seek to accumulate resources to assist them in their less active years. The Arabs are anxious to see if the USG's step-by-step actions will reflect the strength of youth or a habit of thought locked into place by Israeli concerns.

This characteristically cryptic statement was, in fact, the key to understanding Saddam's outlook in February 1990. In his view, the Americans ("young men") remained a great power ("spearheads an important bloc"). But it would not always be so. Within five years — the same duration of time he had identified in his November 1989 speech — the United States would see its relative power erode. The question before America, then, was whether it would accept inevitable decline and invest wisely in closer relations with the Arab states (take "a broader view of U.S. interests" and "accumulate resources to assist them in their less active years," i.e., when the United States was no longer a superpower) or stubbornly cling to the *status quo* ("a habit of thought locked into place by Israeli concerns"). In other words, how America approached the Middle East now would reveal whether it was prepared to accept its fate of relative decline and embrace the Arabs as equals, or cling to its traditional imperial hubris and bias in favor of Israel.

The tenor of Saddam's comments appears not to

84 The U.S. embassy in Baghdad conveyed this information to their British counterparts, who then relayed it to London. See Baghdad to FCO, "Emigration of Soviet Jews," January 31, 1990, FCO 93/6340 f17, TNA.

85 According to Saddam, one American interlocutor had informed him that the United States had closed its doors to Soviet Jews because it could not possibly absorb so large a number of new immigrants. Saddam considered this a "flimsy excuse." A transcript of the press conference is printed in *al-Thawra*, January 30, 1990, 1.

86 Memo to John Kelly, "Your Visit to Iraq," January 19, 1990, DNSA.

87 "Visit of Assistant Secretary Kelly to Baghdad," February 11-12, 1990, DNSA.

have resonated with Kelly and Glaspie. As far as they were concerned, their freewheeling dialogue with the normally reclusive Iraqi president was a smashing success. “[T]here are many things on which we agree and some on which we disagree,” Kelly told Saddam toward the end of their meeting, and “occasional waves” were bound to rock the U.S.-Iraqi relationship. “[B]ut, like the surface of a lake after a storm, the water will become calm again.”<sup>88</sup>

## **Storm Clouds: February 1990**

Contrary to Kelly’s sanguine forecast, the waves buffeting the U.S.-Iraqi relationship only became choppier in the weeks ahead. On February 15, just three days after Saddam’s meeting with Kelly and Glaspie, the *Voice of America* aired an Arabic-language editorial in Iraq under the title “No More Secret Police.” Despite the collapse of communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe, “secret police” remained “entrenched in other countries, such as China, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Cuba, and Albania,” the editorial announced. “The rulers of these countries hold power by force and fear, not by the consent of the governed. But as Eastern Europeans demonstrated so dramatically in 1989, the tide of history is against such rulers. The 1990s should belong not to the dictators and secret police, but to the people.”<sup>89</sup>

The *Voice of America* editorial — which, the broadcast reminded its listeners, reflected the official view of the U.S. government — alarmed Saddam as much as it infuriated him. By equating the toppled communist regimes of Eastern Europe with the Iraqi Baathists, it effectively called into question the legitimacy of the Iraqi government itself. More than “flagrant interference in Iraqi internal affairs,” the editorial constituted “direct [and]

official incitement” against the government, an irate Hamdun informed Glaspie.<sup>90</sup> The U.S. ambassador attempted to reassure Iraqi leaders that it was “in no way USG policy to suggest that the government of Iraq is illegitimate or that the people of Iraq should or will revolt against [it],” but the damage was done.<sup>91</sup> In Saddam’s view, the editorial corroborated Bazzaz’s earlier warning that Iraq’s enemies would attempt to transpose communism’s crisis of legitimacy onto Iraq.<sup>92</sup>

The release of the State Department’s annual human rights report less than one week later only reinforced Saddam’s suspicions that the Bush administration had suddenly assumed a more confrontational posture. “Iraq’s human rights record remained abysmal in 1989,” the report read. Torture, summary execution, disappearances, and arbitrary detention were all commonplace, while the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association were “virtually nonexistent.”<sup>93</sup> Mohamed al Mashat, the Iraqi ambassador in Washington, called on Kelly to convey Baghdad’s “dismay” at the human rights report, which regurgitated “falsifications” peddled by Amnesty International.<sup>94</sup> Nearly two decades later, Mashat would claim that he found it difficult to defend Iraq’s human rights violations during his tenure as ambassador in Washington. “I did not genuinely believe what I was saying,” he wrote in his memoir. But even if it was beyond dispute that Iraq’s human rights record was abysmal, why, he wondered, did the U.S. government seize on it at this particular moment? Mashat concluded that Zionist circles had initiated a media campaign (*hamla*) to smear the Iraqi regime, undermine the U.S.-Iraqi relationship, and condition American public opinion to support a preemptive Israeli war on Iraq. This campaign had the added benefit of deflecting Arab attention from Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel, which, in

88 “Visit of Assistant Secretary Kelly to Baghdad,” February 11-12, 1990, DNSA. The U.S. embassy in Baghdad relayed a readout of Kelly and Glaspie’s conversation with Saddam to their counterparts in the British embassy, which later reported to London that “no storm signals had appeared” during the meeting. Baghdad to FCO, “Iraqi President’s Criticism of the U.S. at ACC Summit,” February 28, 1990, FCO 8/8101 f4, TNA. According to Bazzaz, Saddam came away from this meeting confident that Kelly appreciated the regional role Iraq aspired to play and that the Bush administration would continue to oppose sanctions proposed in Congress. Bazzaz, *Harb talidu ‘ukhra*, 162.

89 *Voice of America*, “No More Secret Police,” Editorial no. 0-03982 (Washington, DC: VOA Public Affairs, February 15, 1990).

90 Embassy Baghdad to State, “Iraqi Protest: VOA Editorial,” February 25, 1990, DNSA.

91 State to Embassy Baghdad, “Iraqi Protest: VOA Editorial,” February 27, 1990, DNSA; Embassy Baghdad to State, “VOA Editorial—No More Secret Police,” February 28, 1990, DNSA.

92 Bazzaz later wrote that the broadcast reinforced Saddam’s suspicions that there had been a “shift in Washington’s position” toward Iraq. Bazzaz, *Harb talidu ‘ukhra*, 163. In 2002 — before Iraqi, U.S., and British archival materials were accessible — Gause perceptively hypothesized that this might have been the case. See Gause, “Iraq’s Decisions to Go to War, 1980 and 1990,” 56–57.

93 U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1989* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 1411–22.

94 State to Embassy Baghdad, “Assistant Secretary Kelly’s Conversation with Iraqi Ambassador,” February 27, 1990, DNSA. Mashat was especially incensed that the State Department’s human rights report relied so heavily on a February 1989 report by Amnesty International documenting Iraq’s widespread use of extrajudicial executions, torture, and disappearances. See Amnesty International, “Iraq: Children Innocent Victims of Political Repression” (New York: Amnesty International, National Office, 1989).



Mashat's view, posed the gravest threat to the Arab nation at that time.<sup>95</sup>

In light of the *Voice of America* editorial and the human rights report, the U.S. government's ongoing freeze on Iraq's agricultural credits assumed a more ominous hue. In reality, the freeze was the result of bureaucratic quarreling. The State Department, Defense Department, and National Security Council all lobbied the Department of Agriculture to deliver the second tranche of credits in the service of broader U.S. commercial and foreign policy interests, but the Treasury and Federal Reserve remained adamant that Baghdad receive no additional credits until the investigation into the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro affair cleared the Iraqi government of wrongdoing.<sup>96</sup> In the absence of clear communication from Washington, however, Iraq arrived at the conclusion that the delay was not technical, but political in nature. This environment provided fertile ground for the suspicions already germinating inside the Iraqi government to flourish. In mid-February, for example, when the Export-Import Bank of the United States rebuffed Iraq's request to upgrade its short-term credit facility to medium-term credit, the governor of the Iraqi central bank blamed "Israeli pressure on Congress" for the setback. According to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, the governor's comment reflected the "unanimity in the Iraqi bureaucracy" that "Zionists" were actively sabotaging the bilateral economic relationship.<sup>97</sup> Around the same time, Richard Murphy, who had served as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs under Reagan, learned during a visit to Baghdad that Iraq had "reliable information of an imminent Israeli strike against Iraq's non-conventional arms industry" akin to the 1981 Osirak attack.<sup>98</sup>

It was in this context of mounting anxiety about U.S. and Israeli intentions that Saddam arrived in Amman for the Arab Cooperation Council leaders' summit in late February. Taking place against the backdrop of an increasingly animated regional de-

bate about the Soviet *aliyah*, the opening ceremony was abuzz with recriminations and lamentations over the Arab states' failure to curb yet another wave of immigration to Israel. The secretary-general of the council alleged that Bush's decision to "make Soviet Jews head to Israel" proved beyond a doubt that the United States had no interest in bringing peace to the Middle East. The Jordanian foreign minister agreed, warning that Israeli aggression "has become more likely than ever as a result of world developments and American support for Israeli settlement policies." How the Arabs handled this latest round of immigration would be a "test" of their ability to navigate the transition to a more uncertain post-Cold War era.<sup>99</sup>

Saddam's public remarks throughout the four-day summit were of a piece with these sentiments.<sup>100</sup> Just as the United States and the Soviet Union had supplanted the British and French empires after 1945, the world of 1990 was witnessing a shift in the global balance of power. That the Soviet Union was in decline went without saying. But in Saddam's view, the United States, too, would soon undergo relative decline vis-à-vis rising powers, Japan and Germany chief among them. Just as he had done in his November 1989 speech and again in his meeting with Kelly and Glaspie two weeks earlier, Saddam identified the next five years as decisive. The world "need[s] no more than five years, by our estimate, to restore a measure of balance with American power;" he told the summit attendees. "What all of us Arabs must do in the next five years is pay special attention," for in the meantime, "we must expect that Israel will take advantage of the opportunities arising from the ongoing world changes." If Israel were to "embark on military aggression ... who would oppose them internationally? The answer is no one."

To substantiate these claims, Saddam offered his audience two pieces of evidence. The first was U.S. "support for the immigration of Soviet Jews in droves — the likes of which has not been seen

95 Mohammed Mashat, *Kuntu safiran li-l-'Iraq fi Washintun: Hikayati ma'a Saddam fi ghazu al-Kuwayt [I Was Iraq's Ambassador in Washington: My Story with Saddam During the Invasion of Kuwait]* (Beirut: Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2008), 60, 64, 74–76, 80.

96 Until April 1990, when relations Iraq began rapidly deteriorating, the State Department lobbied the Department of Agriculture to release the second tranche of credits in the service of broader "foreign policy interests." But other agencies — including Agriculture, Treasury, and the Federal Reserve — remained wary of extending Iraq additional credits due to the ongoing Banca Nazionale del Lavoro investigation and concerns about Iraq's creditworthiness. See, e.g., Kelly to Kimmitt, "Second Tranche of CCC Credits for Iraq," January 12, 1990, DNSA; Treasury Memorandum for the Files, "Iraq and CCC," January 26, 1990, DNSA; USDA Informational Memorandum, "Iraq GSM-102—Pros and Cons for the Additional \$500 Million," February 23, 1990, DNSA.

97 Embassy Baghdad to State, "Iraqi Central Bank Loans Director Seeks More U.S. Business, More U.S. Loans," February 15, 1990, DNSA.

98 Murphy relayed this information to Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh in an interview in November 1990. Freedman and Karsh, *Gulf Conflict*, 32, 444n19.

99 A transcript of the Arab Cooperation Council summit opening ceremony is reproduced in *al-Thawra*, February 19, 3–4.

100 Saddam delivered two public speeches during the summit: the first at the opening ceremony on Feb. 18, and the second at the closing session on Feb. 24. A transcript of the former is printed in *ibid.*; the latter, in *al-Thawra*, February 25, 1990, 2–3. The quotes in the following three paragraphs are taken from these transcripts.

in decades — to Palestine.” The only explanation for this was that the United States “does not want peace, as it claims.” The second was the continued U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf. Throughout the previous decade, Washington had justified its naval patrols under the pretext of Soviet and Iranian threats to that vital waterway. Saddam conceded that those threats were genuine. But with the Soviet Union in retreat and the war with Iran behind them, the ongoing U.S. presence in the Gulf “gives Arabs the right to be suspicious of American policy and intentions.” The Arab world’s only way forward, Saddam argued, was to forge a proactive and unified response to the shifting global balance of power. For too long, rifts among Arab states had hampered their ability to confront Israel, expel foreign imperialists, and recover their rightful place in the sun. By harnessing their collective human potential and wealth of natural resources, the Arab world now had the opportunity to shape a new international balance of power — one finally tipped in their favor.

Saddam’s rhetoric at the Arab Cooperation Council was his clearest articulation yet of the perils awaiting the Arab world in a post-Cold War era. One year later, in a conversation with the Sudanese Islamist leader Hasan al Turabi, Saddam would identify his February 1990 speech as the inflection point in Iraqi relations with the United States. “We clarified our position [regarding] some decisive [global] trends” at the summit, he recalled. “[H]ence we provoked all this hostility.”<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Saddam would go on to tell his military commanders that Operation Desert Storm corroborated “our former analyses [of] February 1990” — a clear reference to the points he outlined privately with Kelly and Glaspie and publicly at the Arab Cooperation Council. “Long before the Kuwait war, we expected America to stand alone in power in the

world,” that is, achieve unipolarity. “We expected America to behave unwisely when it seizes power and our expectations came true.”<sup>102</sup> That Saddam failed to appreciate the shifting international balance of power, that he did not expect the United States to take a firm stance against the invasion of Kuwait, that he presumed the Soviet Union would step in to forestall an American war — none of these narratives holds up under the weight of this evidence.

The U.S. government, for its part, was bewildered by Saddam’s antagonistic rhetoric at the summit.<sup>103</sup> In public testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Kelly was at a loss to explain why the Iraqi president struck so hostile a tone after their “constructive” meeting in Baghdad two weeks earlier.<sup>104</sup> Not for the last time, Saddam’s heavy-handed attempt to articulate his suspicions of U.S. intentions gave skeptics in Washington all the more reason to distrust him.<sup>105</sup>

### **Fighting Fire with Fire: March–May 1990**

In the aftermath of the Arab Cooperation Council summit, a litany of incidents accelerated the deterioration of Baghdad’s relations with Washington. The first was the Iraqi government’s execution of Farzad Bazoft, an Iranian-born journalist based in the United Kingdom. The previous October, London’s *Observer* had sent Bazoft to investigate a mysterious explosion at a weapons plant outside Baghdad. Iraqi authorities detained Bazoft on charges of espionage after he allegedly attempted to smuggle soil samples from the explosion site out of the country.<sup>106</sup> Under duress, Bazoft confessed that he worked on behalf of Israeli intelligence. Despite international appeals for clemency, Bazoft was executed on March 15.<sup>107</sup> One week later, Ger-

101 CRRC SH-MISC-D-001-593, “Minutes of a Meeting Held between President Saddam Hussein and Dr. Hasan al-Turabi, the Secretary General of National Islamic Movement in Sudan,” July 18, 1991.

102 CRRC SH-SHTP-A-000-562, “Meeting between Saddam and Iraqi Military Commanders to Discuss Preparations to Defend against Attacks by Coalition Forces after the Gulf War,” undated [c. 1992]. During the meeting, Saddam references the upcoming U.S. presidential election, suggesting that the conversation took place sometime prior to November 3, 1992.

103 Baghdad to FCO, “Iraqi President’s Criticism of the U.S. at ACC Summit,” February 28, 1990, FCO 8/8101 f4, TNA.

104 “Developments in the Middle East, February 1990,” Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, February 28, 1990, 60. Behind closed doors, Kelly vented his rage at Mashat. State to Embassy Baghdad, “Assistant Secretary Kelly’s Conversation with Iraqi Ambassador,” February 27, 1990, DNSA. In Baghdad, Glaspie lodged similar complaints with Hamdun. “NEA/NGA Daily Activities Report,” February 26, 1990, DNSA.

105 As Hal Brands has suggested, covert U.S. support for Iraqi Kurdish rebels in the early 1970s and the Iran-Contra affair “made [Saddam’s] conspiratorial outlook seem prophetic.” See Brands, “Making the Conspiracy Theorist a Prophet.” On the flipside, one might also argue that Saddam engaged in self-fulfilling prophecies: His suspicions — his certainty that nefarious Zionists and their American lackeys sought to undermine him — led him to overreact even to the slightest of affronts. This, in turn, bred distrust among the very American officials whom Saddam believed were already determined to overthrow him.

106 Embassy London to State, “UK–Iraqi Relations: Heading for a Plunge?” October 17, 1989, DNSA.

107 Whether Bazoft was indeed a spy in the employ of Israel, as the Iraqis insisted, was unclear to outside observers. At the very least, he was “a foolhardy, hard-up exile who got caught up in a clandestine world he did not understand,” wrote the U.S. embassy in London. Embassy London to State, “The Bazoft Case: A Journalist with a Record,” March 19, 1990, DNSA.



ald Bull, a Canadian-born artillery expert secretly helping Iraq to develop a “supergun” capable of launching long-range missiles, was assassinated in Brussels. The Mossad, Israel’s foreign intelligence service, was reportedly responsible.<sup>108</sup> And at the end of the month, customs officials at Heathrow Airport intercepted an Iraq-bound shipment of electrical capacitors which, with the right modifications, could be used to trigger nuclear devices.<sup>109</sup>

On April 2, Saddam met the international clamor over the Bazoft execution, the Bull assassination, and the Heathrow sting with a fiery public address denouncing these latest developments as part of an “imperialist-Zionist” campaign to delegitimize his government in the court of world opinion ahead of an Israeli airstrike. He denied that Iraq was seeking a nuclear weapons program. “We do not need an atomic bomb. We have the binary chem-

ical [*al-kimawi al-muzdawij*, i.e., binary chemical weapons],” Saddam proclaimed, recognizing Iraq’s chemical weapons arsenal publicly for the first time. “By God, we will make fire eat half of Israel if it tries to attack Iraq.”<sup>110</sup>

Why threaten Israel with chemical weapons at this particular juncture, when relations with the United States were already under strain? Many accounts suggest that Saddam issued the threat to distract the Iraqi people from his own misrule and garner popular Arab support ahead of his aggression against Kuwait. According to Bob Woodward, Saddam later divulged that he was merely playing to his audience. “I must whip [the Iraqi people] into a sort of frenzy or emotional mobilization so they will be ready for whatever happens,” he reportedly told Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador to the United States.<sup>111</sup> Samarrai paints a similar picture, writing

108 Freedman and Karsh, *Gulf Conflict*, 34.

109 The sting was the result of a months-long joint U.S.-U.K. investigation. Five individuals handling the shipment were arrested, including two Iraqis. Embassy London to State, “UK-Iraq: Seizure of Nuclear Trigger Devices Will Likely Complicate a Troubled Relationship,” March 28, 1990, DNSA. According to State Department analysts, Baghdad’s attempt to procure the capacitors “strongly suggest[s] that Iraq aspires to a nuclear weapons capability,” though it was unlikely to achieve such a capability before the end of the 1990s. “The more immediate impact ... will be felt in renewed Israeli suspicion of Iraqi intentions.” INR to Secretary of State, “Iraqi Nuclear Program—Attempted Procurement Increases Concern, But Does Not Reduce Timetable,” March 30, 1990, DNSA.

110 *Al-Thawra*, April 3, 1990, 1, 3-4.

111 Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 202.



that Saddam's threat against Israel "was nothing but a declaration for domestic consumption."<sup>112</sup>

What these explanations fail to appreciate was Saddam's fear — indeed, his certitude — that Israel was on the cusp of launching a strike. Aziz later claimed that circumstances in the spring of 1990 reminded the Iraqi leadership of the period leading up to the Israeli strike on the Osirak reactor.<sup>113</sup> As Saddam told a visitor shortly after invading Kuwait, it became clear to the Iraqi government in April that the West had "commissioned Israel with striking at our critical establishments; so, we tried to prevent this operation when we announced on 4/2/1990 that ... we will strike at them vigorously and will burn half of Israel" in retaliation against an Israeli first strike.<sup>114</sup>

Evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Saddam genuinely feared this preemptive Israeli strike — that it was not merely a ruse to deflect attention from his aggressive plans. By March, Samarraï recalled, Saddam had taken to warning his aides that an Israeli strike against "some of our vital targets" was in the offing.<sup>115</sup> Even if Samarraï was skeptical about the reliability of these rumors, which, as noted above, he believed originated with the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Iraqi intelligence services corroborated them. In May, for example, the General Military Intelligence Directorate issued a detailed report warning of an imminent Israeli strike on Iraq, facilitated by "an increase ... in the western media activities directed against Iraq on the pretext that it possesses chemical weapons and is striving to produce nuclear weapons." Just as Saddam had argued at the Arab Cooperation Council summit, the directorate warned that the "shrinking role" of the Soviet Union in the Middle East "yields a propitious opportunity to the United States of America and its ally, the Zionist entity, in passing off its aggressive plans in the region."<sup>116</sup> Seen

in this light, the threat to "make fire eat half of Israel" was not an "irrational" outburst, as one American journalist described it, but an expression of Saddam's genuine fear that the United States and Israel intended to exploit Soviet re-trenchment to undercut his regime in their pursuit of hegemony in the Persian Gulf.<sup>117</sup>

A range of Arab, American, and British officials also understood Saddam's April 2 threat as a crude attempt to deter what he believed was an imminent Israeli attack, not a signal of his intentions to initiate hostilities. "Iraq genuinely anticipates an Israeli attack ... in the course of the next 2-3 months," the Tunisian Foreign Ministry informed the British ambassador in Tunis.<sup>118</sup> Even the Qatari emir's chief adviser — in the words of the British ambassador in Doha, "no friend of Iraq"—accepted that Iraqi fears of a U.S.-backed Israeli strike were sincere. "Israel had at least tacit consent from the U.S. for this strike," he confidently told his British interlocutors. "The Iraqis had therefore been compelled to go onto the propaganda offensive to prevent an attack taking place."<sup>119</sup>

The point was not lost on Washington. Less than two weeks after his April 2 speech, Saddam conveyed the same message to a congressional delegation led by Republican Sen. Bob Dole. Israel had "orchestrated" a media campaign "to provide political and psychological cover for an Israeli strike," Saddam told his visitors. "Such a campaign preceded the 1981 strike. Iraq is determined to deter [it] if it can."<sup>120</sup> Aziz highlighted the "deterrent aspect" of Saddam's rhetoric to Haass during his visit to Baghdad the following month.<sup>121</sup> The Iraqi leadership's case for deterrence appears to have sunk in. As one National Security Council memorandum subsequently reflected, "Saddam Hussein's threats were intended to sharply define Iraq's readiness to defend itself from a presumed Israeli or U.S.-Israeli attack—that he has no inter-

112 Samarraï, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya*, 199.

113 Milton Viorst, "Report from Baghdad," *The New Yorker* 67, no. 18 (June 24, 1991): 65.

114 CRRC SH-PDWN-D-000-467, "Meeting Between Saddam Hussein and Sheikh Sidi Ahmad Walad Baba, the Mauritanian Minister of Interior, Regarding His Support for Iraq," October 4, 1990.

115 Samarraï, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya*, 222.

116 CRRC SH-PDWN-D-000-546, "General Military Intelligence Directorate Assessment of Israeli Intentions toward Iraq," May 22, 1990.

117 For "irrational," see Sciolino, *The Outlaw State*, 173–74. As detailed below, when an Israeli minister threatened to attack Iraq with chemical weapons in late July 1990, Hamdun informed the U.S. embassy that Saddam had made his threat in April to deter precisely such an Israeli attack. Embassy Baghdad to State, "Demarche on Israeli Statement on CW," July 30, 1990, Richard N. Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL.

118 Tunis to FCO, "Iraq," April 6, 1990, FCO 8/8087 f9, TNA.

119 Doha to FCO, "Iraq/Israel/West," April 16, 1990, FCO 8/8086 f13, TNA.

120 Embassy Baghdad to Secretary of State, "CODEL Dole: Meeting with Saddam Hussein," April 12, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 2, BPL. In the National Security Council Deputies Committee meeting held on April 16, Deputy National Security Advisor Robert Gates commented that Saddam "is feeling much maligned." "Minutes of the NSC/DC Meeting on Iraq," April 16, 1990, Robert Gates Papers, CF00946, Folder 4, BPL.

121 A readout of Aziz's conversation with Haass was conveyed by the U.S. embassy in Baghdad to the British embassy. See Baghdad to FCO, "U.S./Iraq: Visit by NSC Official," May 22, 1990, FCO 8/8089 f18, TNA.



est in provoking a major military exchange with Israel.<sup>122</sup> Even Israel concluded that the Iraqi president's apprehensions were genuine. As Israel Defense Forces intelligence later informed the British ambassador in Tel Aviv, "Saddam really believed that there was a U.S./Israeli plot against him: he was not merely making it up."<sup>123</sup>

Whether Israel was, in fact, preparing to attack Iraq in the spring of 1990 remains unclear.<sup>124</sup> At the very least, the Bush administration began warning Israel not to strike Iraq that spring, and U.S. officials made as much clear to Baghdad. "We condemned the 1981 [Osirak] raid and would do so again today," Glaspie told Hamdun in mid-April. "We are telling Israel so. There is no green light."<sup>125</sup> No sooner had Glaspie conveyed that message to Baghdad than intervening events undercut her, however. Just days later, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry expressed concerns about an American airborne warning and control system in Turkish airspace "facing Iraq."<sup>126</sup> Glaspie subsequently informed the Iraqis that the system was tasked by NATO to surveil the Turkish border with the Soviet Union, not Iraq. Nevertheless, she came away with "the strong impression that the Iraqis were genuinely, albeit unjustifiably, concerned that the Americans might indeed be collecting intelligence on Iraqi military/industrial installations in order to pass this on to the Israelis to prepare the ground for an Israeli pre-emptive strike." Separately, Baghdad warned Turkey that Israel might attempt to launch an assault on Iraq via Turkish airspace.<sup>127</sup>

## Enter Kuwait: May–August 1990

By early May, the Middle East was buzzing with talk of war between Iraq and Israel. As one Egyptian official told his British counterpart, "the atmosphere in Baghdad today [resembled] the atmosphere in Cairo in 1967" — that is, on the eve of the Six Day War, when Israel preemptively destroyed the Egyptian air force.<sup>128</sup> It was all the more surprising to outside observers, then, when Saddam abruptly redirected his wrath toward his Kuwaiti neighbors in June and July.

To be sure, tensions between Iraq and Kuwait had been simmering just below the surface over the previous year and a half. On multiple occasions since the end of the war with Iran in August 1988, Baghdad had broached the longstanding border dispute with the Kuwaiti government, which seemed more interested in settling Iraq's outstanding debts.<sup>129</sup> In January 1990, Iraq asked the Kuwaiti emir to forgive its debt of \$8 billion and grant a further \$10 billion for reconstruction. He refused.<sup>130</sup> At a closed session of the Arab Cooperation Council summit the following month, Saddam said that Iraq needed \$30 billion, reportedly telling his Egyptian, Jordanian, and Yemeni counterparts: "Go and tell them in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf that if they don't give it to me, I will know how to take it."<sup>131</sup> To make matters worse, Kuwait was producing oil in excess of its Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries quota in order to lower oil prices, which the country believed would spur higher global oil consumption and discourage the search for substitutes. But low oil prices undercut Iraq's plans to revitalize its economy, rebuild its infrastructure, provide

122 NSC Policy Coordinating Committee, "Nonproliferation Initiative for Iraq," July 10, 1990, DNSA.

123 Tel Aviv to FCO, "Iraq/Kuwait Briefing by IDF Intelligence," August 14, 1990, FCO 93/6275 f49, TNA.

124 There is no silver bullet in the currently available U.S. archival evidence. In a book published shortly after the Gulf War, the journalists Andrew and Leslie Cockburn cite "reliable information from within the Israeli military" that Israel planned to attack Iraqi chemical production facilities sometime in 1990 but backed down after Bush "refused to grant permission." Andrew Cockburn and Leslie Cockburn, *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israeli Covert Relationship* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1991), 351–52. As far as the British ambassador in Tel Aviv could tell, "we believe that the [Israeli] worry [about Saddam's threatening rhetoric] is genuine, but doubt whether the Israelis are yet thinking in terms of a preemptive or preventative [sic] strike." The Israelis "know that the situation on the ground is quite different from that at the time of the 1981 Osirak raid. While the Israelis might be capable of launching a successful pre-emptive [sic] strike to take out the developing Iraqi nuclear programme (which they are watching particularly closely) they believe that the Iraqi response to such a raid would in all probability involve CW [chemical weapons]. And they know that such a successful pre-emptive strike to take out the entire Iraqi CW (and BW [biological weapons]) capability cannot be guaranteed." Tel Aviv to FCO, "Israel/Iraq," April 26, 1990, FCO 8/8086 f18a.

125 Secretary of State to Embassy Baghdad, "Tensions in U.S.-Iraqi Relations: Demarche," April 12, 1990, DNSA. As the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office put it, "We know that the Americans are actively trying to calm the Iraqis and reduce their fear (which we accept may be genuinely felt) that Israel is poised for a preemptive strike against Iraqi installations." FCO to Manama, "Iraq," April 25, 1990, FCO 8/8153 f1, TNA.

126 Baghdad to FCO, "U.S./Iraq," April 23, 1990, FCO 8/8089 f12, TNA.

127 Baghdad to FCO, "U.S./Iraq: AWACS Incident," May 1, 1990, FCO 8/8089 f14, TNA.

128 FCO to Tel Aviv, "Israel/Iraq," May 9, 1990, FCO 8/8086 f22, TNA.

129 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 41–44.

130 NEA to Kelly, "Your Visit to Iraq," January 19, 1990, DNSA.

131 Miller and Mylroie, *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf*, 12. The authors attribute this quote to an unnamed but "reliable" and "prominent diplomat."



services to its population, and maintain the high military spending that it considered necessary to fend off Iran.<sup>132</sup>

Although Saddam certainly hoped to win financial and territorial concessions from Kuwait after the Iran-Iraq War, it would be a mistake to infer from these earlier diplomatic spats that the Iraqi leadership had devised a master plan to invade, occupy, and annex Kuwait.<sup>133</sup> Nor did their decades-old border dispute make conflict inevitable at this particular moment. A careful reading of the allegations that Saddam leveled against the Ku-

of our vital targets.”<sup>134</sup>

An Arab League summit in late May encapsulated the intermingling of Saddam’s preoccupation with the end of the Cold War and his suspicions of the Kuwaiti royal family. Since early 1990, the Palestine Liberation Organization had called for an emergency summit to formulate a unified Arab position with regard to Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel. Saddam endorsed the proposal, offering to host the meeting in Baghdad. The Palestine Liberation Organization reciprocated by fusing the immigration issue with the ongoing Western “campaign” to smear Iraq, portraying both as part of an imperialist effort to assert U.S. and Israeli hegemony in a post-Cold War Middle East. As one senior Palestinian official put it, “The PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] believes that the summit is the Arab world’s last chance. We either endorse plans which

## Iraq’s deteriorating economy, the appearance of Kuwaiti intransigence, the intensifying Western “campaign” against Baghdad, mass Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel, the prospect of preemptive Israeli airstrikes on Iraq — all of these developments coalesced to reinforce Saddam’s certitude that a conspiracy was afoot...

waiti monarchy in the spring and summer of 1990 reveals that they were inextricable from his interpretation of the American-Israeli conspiracy he believed was already in full swing. In March, Samarraï recalled, Saddam went on a tirade against Kuwait’s royal family, Al Sabah, during a private meeting at the presidential palace. For eight years, Iraq had sacrificed blood and treasure to protect Kuwait from Iranian fundamentalism, only for the Sabah family to “conspire with the Americans against your revolution.” From one direction, Washington encouraged Gulf oil overproduction to depress prices, thereby hampering the Iraqi economy and its military preparedness. “From the other direction,” Saddam reportedly said, “you have to expect an Israeli military strike or more to destroy some

measure up to the dangers and threats or else the next war will determine the region’s destiny under American hegemony.”<sup>135</sup> The Iraqi government cast the stakes of the Baghdad summit in a similar light. “The time when we put the Soviet Union and the Eastern camp on our side has ended,” said Taha Yassin Ramadan, Saddam’s first deputy prime minister. In this new era, the Arab states would have to learn to “develop their self-reliance.”<sup>136</sup> Even the Saudi foreign minister divulged to the British government that, while he was keen to see Arab “moderation” prevail at the summit, the “relative scale [of Soviet Jewish immigration] was comparable to that which had preceded [the] 1948 war.”<sup>137</sup>

In the public proceedings of the Baghdad summit, Saddam, Arafat, Jordan’s King Hussein, Egypt’s

132 In November 1989, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries raised Kuwait’s quota to 1.5 million barrels per day, but production was reportedly as high as 1.9 million barrels per day in January 1990 and 2 million barrels per day in February. As of April, Kuwait was still producing 2 million barrels per day. Kuwait to FCO, “Kuwait’s Oil Empire,” February 26, 1990, FCO 8/7950 f2a, TNA; Kuwait to FCO, “Fall in Oil Price: Consequences for Kuwait,” April 22, 1990, FCO 8/7950 f6, TNA; Kuwait to FCO, “Visit of Mr. Wakeham: The Oil Scene in Kuwait,” May 8, 1990, FCO 8/7950 f8a, TNA. Similarly, the oil economist Robert Mabro suggests that Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates believed that low prices would raise demand for oil, disincentivize the search for alternative energy sources and energy conservation, and spur economic growth, which “is the most powerful determinant of increases in the demand for oil.” Robert Mabro, “The Impact of the Gulf Crisis on World Oil and OPEC,” *International Journal* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 242–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40202937>.

133 Iraqi opposition figures in exile later claimed that Saddam initiated plans to invade as early as March 1990, “long before the oil conspiracy... was mentioned.” I have seen no evidence for this. Faleh Abd al-Jabar, “Roots of an Adventure: The Invasion of Kuwait: Iraqi Political Dynamics,” in *The Gulf between Us: The Gulf War and Beyond*, ed. Victoria Brittain (London: Virago, 1991), 37.

134 Samarraï, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya*, 222. For a slightly different translation of this passage, see Gause, “Iraq and the Gulf War: Decision-Making in Baghdad,” 9.

135 Lamis K. Andoni, *Jordan Times*, May 22, 1990, 1, 5.

136 “Taha Yassin Ramadan li-l-Sharq al-Awsat,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 18, 1990, 3.

137 Jeddah to FCO, “Arab Summit: UK/Iraq,” May 16, 1990, FCO 8/8153 f25a, TNA.

Hosni Mubarak, and the other leaders in attendance focused not only on the immediate danger of Israeli expansionism, but on the broader global shifts of which the Soviet *aliyah* was symptomatic — namely, Soviet reform and retrenchment.<sup>138</sup> The most impassioned address came from a distraught King Hussein, who feared that Soviet immigration presaged the Likud's plan to expel West Bank Palestinians *en masse* to the East Bank. He beseeched his Arab brethren for economic aid and political backing. "The repercussions and negative effects of these changes [i.e., the end of the Cold War] threaten us. Nevertheless, we continue to act as bystanders and spectators," he lamented.<sup>139</sup> Saddam, for his part, maintained that Iraq would meet an Israeli attack on any Arab state with a counterattack, and he condemned the United States for backing the "Zionist entity" to the hilt. "We must tell [America] that it cannot continue this policy at the same time that it claims the friendship of the Arabs," he announced.<sup>140</sup> Once again, the Bush administration privately recognized that Saddam's rhetoric was a function of his self-perceived insecurity. "He is genuinely concerned about an Israeli attack," the deputy director of the CIA commented, "and his criticism of us for supporting Israel [is meant] to get our attention and force us to stop Israeli immigration."<sup>141</sup>

Meanwhile, in a private session of the Baghdad summit, tensions flared between Saddam and the Kuwaiti emir, Sheikh Jaber al Ahmed al Sabah, whom the former accused of waging a "new war" against Iraq through oil overproduction.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, against the backdrop of the Arab League meeting, economic conditions in Iraq continued to deteriorate. In 1989, oil revenues were \$13.3 billion, just half the prewar level of \$26 billion. Even in the best-case scenario — a slight increase in Iraq's quota and a modest rise in oil prices — oil revenues would only rise by \$1 billion in 1992, well

short of the amount needed to rectify the country's balance of payments issues.<sup>143</sup> The ongoing global oil surplus made it unlikely that even a modest oil price increase would boost Iraqi revenues quickly enough to make a difference. "The bottom line," wrote Bush's aides: "Saddam will not get quick monetary relief from oil exports."<sup>144</sup>

Iraq's deteriorating economy, the appearance of Kuwaiti intransigence, the intensifying Western "campaign" against Baghdad, mass Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel, the prospect of preemptive Israeli airstrikes on Iraq — all of these developments coalesced to reinforce Saddam's certitude that a conspiracy was afoot, leading him to consider taking drastic measures against the most proximate and vulnerable party to it: Kuwait. On June 27, Saddam convened a meeting of his closest advisers to deliberate their options. Deputy Prime Minister Saadun Hammadi had just returned from a tour of the Gulf, during which he pressed the Arab monarchs to abide by their oil production quotas. The Kuwaiti emir reassured Hammadi that Kuwait would adhere to its quota, but the foreign minister subsequently contradicted him.<sup>145</sup> "It seems [the Kuwaitis] do not understand words," Saddam told his advisers. "We have to use another language with them."<sup>146</sup>

The Iraqi government drew up two plans: Plan A, which envisioned seizing the Kuwaiti islands of Warba and Bubiyan at the head of the Gulf and making an incursion into Kuwaiti territory no deeper than 30–50 kilometers beyond the border; and Plan B, which entailed seizing Kuwait in its entirety. Plan A was the more likely of the two until late July, when Saddam concluded that taking all of Kuwait would give him greater leverage to deter the United States and Israel.<sup>147</sup> According to Hamdani's memoir, Saddam informed the Republican Guard leadership in early July that the Kuwaiti emir was "unequivocally" complicit in the international con-

138 All Arab leaders attended the Baghdad summit except Saddam's Baathist rival, Syria's Hafez al Assad.

139 The text of King Hussein's speech is reprinted in the Jordanian newspaper *al-Dustur*, May 29, 1990, 18.

140 The text of Saddam's speech is reprinted in *al-Thawra*, May 29, 1990, 1-2.

141 "Minutes of the NSC/DC Meeting on Iraq," May 29, 1990, Gates Papers, CF00946, Folder 4, BPL.

142 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 40–41, 46–47. Bazzaz claims that Saddam became irate with Kuwait's Sheikh Jaber after noticing the emir's indifference to King Hussein's pleas for assistance in the face of supposed Israeli expansionism.

143 USDA, "Iraq—Country Risk Assessment for FY 1991," July 10, 1990, DNSA. Samarrai gives a similar estimate of Iraqi oil revenue in 1989 (\$12 billion), noting that half of it went toward servicing debts. Samarrai, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya*, 214.

144 Charles to Scowcroft, "Inter Agency Meeting on the Persian Gulf," July 27, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 2, BPL.

145 Kuwait to FCO, "Kuwait Oil Policy," June 28, 1990, FCO 8/7950 f9, TNA; Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 48–49, 54; Saad Bazzaz, *Al-jiniralat akhir man yu'allim [The Generals Are the Last to Know]* (London: Dar al-Hikmah, 1996), 60–61. Saddam was also enraged to learn that the Kuwaitis had "insulted" Hammadi. Just an hour before Hammadi was due to arrive in Kuwait, the Kuwaitis asked him to delay his trip by one day while they met with the Iranian foreign minister.

146 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 54; Bazzaz, *Al-jiniralat akhir man yu'allim*, 60–61. Similarly, Samarrai notes that discussions about using force against Kuwait were confined to a small circle of senior officials. Samarrai, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya*, 225, 226–27.

147 Mohamed Heikal, *Illusions of Triumph: An Arab View of the Gulf War* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 244; Bazzaz, *Al-jiniralat akhir man yu'allim*, 55.

spiracy to destabilize Iraq.<sup>148</sup> At the same time, Saddam remained preoccupied with the prospect of an Israeli strike on Iraq's nuclear reactors and biological weapons plants. "This fear was a strong factor in moving the battle to Kuwait and getting out of the economic crisis," Samarrai later wrote.<sup>149</sup>

Indeed, the summer saw tensions between Iraq, on the one hand, and Kuwait, Israel, and the United States, on the other, reach new heights. On July 10–11, the Iraqi, Kuwaiti, Saudi, Qatari, and Emirati oil ministers met in Jeddah, where they pledged to honor their oil production quotas. Just days later, however, the Kuwaiti minister backtracked, informing the Kuwaiti paper of record, *al-Qabas*, that in October the government would resume pumping however much oil it saw fit.<sup>150</sup> The Iraqi leadership took this as yet another sign of Kuwaiti complicity in a campaign to push Iraq to the brink of economic collapse.<sup>151</sup>

In light of this latest development, Saddam and his advisers decided to air their grievances publicly.<sup>152</sup> On July 15, Aziz sent a letter to the Arab League secretary-general formally outlining Iraq's complaints against Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, including allegations that Kuwait had encroached on Iraqi territory during the Iran-Iraq War and stolen \$2.4 billion worth of oil from the Rumaila oilfield straddling their border. "Such behavior amounts to a military aggression," Aziz wrote.<sup>153</sup> The Jordanian foreign minister had discouraged Iraq from sending the letter, but Aziz was stalwart, "firmly convinced that the Kuwaiti action was part of a wider conspiracy."<sup>154</sup> Two

days later, in an address marking the 22nd anniversary of the Baathist revolution of July 1968, Saddam accused Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates of complicity in the imperialist-Zionist conspiracy to subvert his regime. "*Qatti' al-a'naq wa-la qatti' al-arzaq*," he proclaimed — an Arabic idiom roughly meaning that it is better to cut one's own neck than to forfeit one's livelihood.<sup>155</sup>

In a cable to Washington, Glaspie's translation captured the sentiment: "We prefer death to humiliation." "We think Iraq needs money," she wrote. "Without quick revenue enhancement, the [Iraqi government], which kept major projects going even throughout the war, may have to give up some of the plans it has bragged about so much." Aziz's letter, coupled with Saddam's latest speech, "marks the beginning of a major policy effort to extract billions of dollars from the Gulf and to ensure the price of oil rises fast."<sup>156</sup> Days later, Baghdad began mobilizing tens of thousands of troops toward the border with Kuwait.<sup>157</sup>

Glaspie was becoming more concerned by the day. On July 21, she held a meeting at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad with the Kuwaiti ambassador, who expressed apprehension about Iraqi belligerence. Iraqi intelligence, having surveilled the meeting, informed Saddam about the conversation. He instructed *al-Thawra* to publish a front-page article the following day construing the meeting as definitive proof of Kuwaiti "coordination" with the United States.<sup>158</sup> It was in this context that Saddam summoned Glaspie for a personal audience on July 25. Arriving at the Foreign Ministry on short

148 Hamdani, *Qabla an yughadiruna al-tarikh*, 193–94.

149 Samarrai, *Hutam al-bawwaba al-sharqiyya*, 224.

150 Abdel Fattah Darwish, "Intajna sa-yurfa 'u fi 'uktubir," *al-Qabas*, July 16, 1990, 1–2.

151 Kuwait to FCO, "Kuwait Oil Policy," July 17, 1990, FCO 8/7950 f11, TNA; Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 54–55; Bazzaz, *Al-jiniralat akhir man yu'allim*, 63. In late August 1990, after Iraq invaded Kuwait and U.S. forces began arriving in Saudi Arabia under the banner of Operation Desert Shield, the Iraqi government announced that it had obtained a tape recording of a phone call between Saudi King Fahd and another Gulf ruler that purportedly took place on July 9, one day before the oil ministers' meeting began. According to the Iraqi transcript of the phone call, King Fahd said that the Gulf states need only hold out against Iraqi pressure for two more months, after which circumstances would change. The Iraqis took this to mean that the Saudis were coordinating the Gulf-wide "conspiracy" to overproduce oil at the expense of Iraq. For the transcript, see BRCC, Box 01\_2126\_0003\_0576-0577, Hoover. The transcript is written in the Gulf dialect, but it remains unclear whether the document is authentic. Baghdad alleged that the tape recording demonstrated beyond a doubt that Fahd himself was the "leader of the operation," but it is just as likely that Iraq fabricated the call in a ploy to discredit the Saudis. Bazzaz also discusses the phone call — which he maintains is genuine — in *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 57–58.

152 Bazzaz, *Al-jiniralat akhir man yu'allim*, 63.

153 The Iraqi press published Aziz's letter to the Arab League two days later. Embassy Baghdad to State, "Iraqi Threats to Kuwait and UAE," July 18, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL; Baghdad to FCO, "Iraq/Kuwait/UAE: Oil Pricing," July 19, 1990, FCO 8/7822 f10, TNA.

154 Amman to FCO, "Iraq/Kuwait/UAE: Oil Pricing," July 23, 1990, FCO 8/7822 f26, TNA.

155 The *New York Times* translated this as "cutting necks is better than cutting means of living," which somewhat misleadingly connoted hostility rather than insecurity. Youssef Ibrahim, "Iraq Threatens Emirates and Kuwait on Oil Glut," *New York Times*, July 18, 1990, D1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/18/business/iraq-threatens-emirates-and-kuwait-on-oil-glut.html>. The full text of Saddam's July 17 speech is reproduced in *al-Thawra*, July 18, 1990, 3–4.

156 Embassy Baghdad to State, "Iraqi Threats to Kuwait and UAE," BPL; Embassy Baghdad to State, "Saddam's National Day Speech: Warning to OPEC Over-Producers," July 18, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL.

157 Embassy Baghdad to State, "Kuwait: Iraq Keeps Up the Pressure," July 22, 1990, DNSA.

158 "Tansiq?!" *al-Thawra*, July 22, 1990, 1. On Iraqi surveillance of the meeting and Saddam's reaction, see Bazzaz, *Al-jiniralat akhir man yu'allim*, 71. See also Embassy Baghdad to Secretary of State, "Kuwait: Iraq Keeps Up the Pressure," July 22, 1990, DNSA; Baghdad to FCO, "Iraq/Kuwait," July 22, 1990, FCO 8/7822 f20, TNA.



notice and without instructions from Washington, Glaspie expected to meet with her usual interlocutors. Instead, she was whisked away to the presidential office, where she found herself face to face with Saddam.<sup>159</sup> Over the course of their two-hour meeting, Glaspie notoriously informed the Iraqi president that the United States “takes no position” on his dispute with Kuwait. After the invasion, the Iraqi government would release a transcript of the conversation in a cynical ploy to shift responsibility onto Glaspie for failing to warn Iraq explicitly against invading Kuwait. Members of Congress, the media, and not a few conspiracy theorists seized on Glaspie’s words as evidence that, at best, the Bush administration had failed to grasp Saddam’s hostile intentions. At worst, Washington had duped Saddam, giving him a “green light” to invade Kuwait only to use the invasion as a pretext to wage war on Iraq.<sup>160</sup>

In fact, the “no position” talking point was hardly new to the Iraqi government. On at least two separate occasions over the previous week alone, Glaspie had reminded Hamdun that “we have never taken a position” on Iraqi-Kuwaiti disputes, “and we do not intend to begin now.”<sup>161</sup> Nor was Glaspie the only U.S. official to convey this sentiment. On July 19, a State Department official informed the Iraqi ambassador in Washington that the U.S. government “takes no position on the substance of bilateral issues concerning Iraq and Kuwait.”<sup>162</sup> And on July 24 — one day before Glaspie sat down with Saddam — a cable from Washington instructed *all* U.S. embassies in the Persian Gulf, Western Europe, and Japan to inform their host governments that although “[t]he implications of having oil production and pricing policy in the Gulf determined and enforced by Iraqi guns are disturbing,” the United States “take[s] no position on the border delineation issue raised by Iraq with respect to Kuwait.”<sup>163</sup>

The far more important takeaway from Saddam’s meeting with Glaspie — and one which the green light narrative obscures — is that the suspicions that had been incubating since late 1989 remained at the top of the Iraqi president’s mind. Saddam

had forgiven the United States for “Irangate,” he told Glaspie, but American behavior over the past year had revived his suspicions that Washington secretly aimed to undermine him. This line of thinking was of a piece with Saddam’s earlier remarks to Kelly and his speech at the Arab Cooperation Council, where he warned that the continued U.S. naval presence in the Gulf and Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel planted seeds of doubt in his mind about whether Washington truly sought peace in the Middle East. Next came the Western “media campaign” against Iraq — the *Voice of America* editorial, the human rights report, and the uproar over the Bazoft execution — which Iraq took as a Western and Zionist plan to besmirch the country in the court of public opinion ahead of an Israeli attack. Finally, Iraq faced “economic warfare” from the Kuwaitis and Emiratis, who, ostensibly under U.S. and Zionist influence, exceeded their oil production quotas to depress oil prices. Just as he declared that death was preferable to humiliation one week earlier, the Iraqi president now impressed upon Glaspie that he would never bow to foreign plots to crush Iraq, even if this meant war. “It is not reasonable to ask our people to bleed rivers of blood for 8 years then to tell them: now you have to accept aggression from Kuwait, the UAE [United Arab Emirates] or from the U.S. or from Israel,” Saddam told Glaspie. Even more provocatively — and desperately — he declared:

You can come to Iraq with aircraft and missiles but do not push us to the point where we cease to care. And when we feel that you want to injure our pride and take the Iraqis’ chance of a high standard of living, then we will cease to care and death will be the choice for us. Then we would not care if you fired one hundred missiles for each missile we fired. Because without pride, life would have no value.<sup>164</sup>

Glaspie sensed Saddam’s desperation, reporting to Washington immediately after the meeting: “If publicly humiliated, he warned (or, rather, plead-

159 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu `ukhra*, 61; Bazzaz, *Al-jiniralat akhir man yu`allim*, 69–76.

160 See, e.g., Yousif, “The Iraqi-U.S. War: A Conspiracy Theory”; Clark, *The Fire This Time*; Baram, “The Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait: Decision-Making in Baghdad”; Mearsheimer and Walt, “An Unnecessary War”; Jentleson, *With Friends like These*.

161 Embassy Baghdad to Secretary of State, “Iraqi Letter to Arab League,” July 19, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL; Embassy Baghdad to State, “Iraqi Query Re US/UAE ‘Manoeuvres’ [sic],” July 24, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL.

162 Secretary of State, “Iraqi Letter to Arab League Threatening Kuwait,” July 19, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL.

163 Secretary of State to EC et al, “U.S. Reaction to Iraqi Threats in the Gulf,” July 24, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL.

164 These quotes come from the English translation of the Iraqi government’s transcript of the meeting. See “Meeting of the President Commander with Ambassador Glaspie,” July 25, 1990, C. David Welch Papers, CF00362, Folder 19, BPL.

ed), Iraq would have to ‘respond.’”<sup>165</sup>

Nevertheless, Glaspie came away from her conversation with Saddam heartened by his apparent willingness to resolve his disputes with Kuwait peacefully. This impression was bolstered by the fact that, midway through their conversation, Saddam received a phone call from Mubarak confirming that Kuwait had agreed to meet Iraq for further negotiations in the Saudi city of Jeddah in the coming days.<sup>166</sup> Even the subject line of her cable to Washington — “Saddam’s Message of Friendship to President Bush” — conveyed optimism. Convinced that conflict had been averted, she departed Iraq two days later for a previously scheduled holiday. Having read Glaspie’s reports, Haass informed Bush’s national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, that “things may have cooled.” Iraq was merely engaging in “a form of gunboat diplomacy that should pass peacefully.”<sup>167</sup> Bush, for his part, was reassured by the soothing words of friendly Arab leaders. “I believe that hopefully something will be worked out,” King Hussein told the U.S. president over the phone.<sup>168</sup>

In Baghdad, the atmosphere was anything but calm. On July 27, the Israeli minister of science and technology publicly insinuated that Israel was capable of countering Iraq’s threats with its own chemical weapons arsenal.<sup>169</sup> Iraqi authorities seized on the minister’s threat as further evidence of Israeli plans to attack.<sup>170</sup> Two days later, an Iraqi delegation led by Vice President Izzat Ibrahim al Douri arrived in Jeddah for the last-ditch round of negotiations with Kuwait arranged by Mubarak. Douri reportedly found the Kuwaiti delegation intransigent.<sup>171</sup> Returning to Baghdad empty-handed late in the evening of Aug. 1, Douri immediately proceeded to a meeting with Saddam, Aziz, and a handful of other senior officials to weigh their options. The “inflexibility” of the Kuwaiti delegation in Jeddah bolstered the Iraqis’ confidence that Ku-

wait was acting at the behest of the United States. According to Bazzaz’s account, the latest Iraqi intelligence confirmed that Israel had selected its targets, which included the Republican Palace, military leadership headquarters, and the Tuwaitha nuclear research center. Convinced that Israeli airstrikes might begin at any moment, Iraq could hesitate no longer. Just before midnight, cloistered in Baghdad, Saddam and his advisers resolved that removing the Kuwaiti royal family was their only escape from the American-led plot in which they were ensnared.<sup>172</sup>

## Conclusion

An enduring narrative of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait holds that Saddam’s greatest blunder was his timing. If only Baghdad had seized Kuwait earlier, when Moscow still had the wherewithal to stand up to the United States, or later, when an overstretched Washington was preoccupied with crises elsewhere, Saddam just might have gotten away with his aggression. “Saddam Hussein is a man of many defects,” Baker later wrote, “and fortunately for America and the rest of the civilized world, an atrocious sense of timing is one of them.”<sup>173</sup>

This narrative depicts the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as if the Middle East were hermetically sealed off from global trends, or as if *perestroika*, U.S.-Soviet rapprochement, and upheaval behind the Iron Curtain took place in a European vacuum. In fact, the timing of the invasion was no accident. That Saddam chose to seize Kuwait when he did is the key to unlocking his motives. “[W]e are convinced that what we have done was a must,” Saddam told a visiting Soviet diplomat in October 1990. The “only choice that was presented to us was to collapse, so the Americans and the backward ones [i.e., reactionary Arab states] can do what they wish. Our

165 Embassy Baghdad, “Ambassador’s Meeting with Saddam Husayn,” July 25, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 1, BPL.

166 Ibid; “Meeting of the President Commander with Ambassador Glaspie,” BPL. According to the Iraqi version of events, Saddam had pledged to Mubarak that Iraq would not resort to force against Kuwait until the Jeddah talks took place. But Mubarak informed the Kuwaitis that he had received Saddam’s assurance that Iraq would not resort to force no matter the outcome of the talks. Thus, after Iraq invaded Kuwait, an embarrassed Mubarak claimed that Saddam had deceived him. Bazzaz, *Harb talidu `ukhra*, 62–63. Saddam rehearsed the Iraqi narrative in his open letter to Bush on August 16, 1990. See BRCC, Box 01\_2126\_0003\_0457-461, Hoover.

167 Haass to Scowcroft, “Gulf Contingency Planning,” July 25, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 2, BPL.

168 Telcon, “Telephone Conversation with King Hussein of Jordan,” July 28, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 4, BPL; Telcon, “Telephone Conversation with King Hussein of Jordan,” July 31, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 4, BPL.

169 State to Embassy Tel Aviv, “Request for Clarification on Israel’s Chemical Weapons Capability,” August 1, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL; Bazzaz, *Harb talidu `ukhra*, 55.

170 Embassy Baghdad to State, “GOI Requests Official USG Reaction on Israeli CW Admission,” July 30, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL; Embassy Baghdad to State, “Demarche on Israeli Statement on CW,” July 30, 1990, Haass Papers, CF01937, Folder 3, BPL.

171 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu `ukhra*, 83–86.

172 Ibid., 81–89; Bazzaz, *Al-jiniralat akhir man yu`allim*, 81–83.


173 Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 2.

only choice was to go after the involved circle of conspirators tasked with this mission.”<sup>174</sup> Saddam reiterated the point on the eve of Operation Desert Storm, informing Arafat, “this is not our timing. If it were up to us, I swear to God, we would have chosen [a different] timing, but this is a necessary timing.” In Saddam’s mind, the turning point in U.S.-Iraqi relations came with his threat to “make fire eat half of Israel” in early April 1990:

If the Arab nation were in a better situation, we would have delayed the words that we had said to another time. If the pro-Arab international conditions were better than what they are now, we would not have said what we had said, period. But, because Israel increased their mercilessness, stubbornness, and conceitedness ... we suggested that duty requires us to say something and to announce what we are saying right now and not two years from now.<sup>175</sup>

On multiple occasions, Aziz struck a similar note, framing the invasion as a compulsory choice between survival and death. “Iraq had no choice but to act as it acted on the 2nd of August 1990. Either to be destroyed, to be suffocated and strangled inside its territory, or attack the enemy in the outside [i.e., Kuwait]. That was the calculation, and I think it was a correct one. Correct in the sense that you had no other options.”<sup>176</sup> As Aziz put it even more starkly on another occasion, “There were two options before us: either take the initiative and strike, or gradually get eaten up.”<sup>177</sup> These retrospective justifications may appear self-serving, but as this article demonstrates, they are consistent with what Saddam, his advisers, and his intelligence agencies said publicly and privately in the months preceding the invasion of Kuwait.

Attributing Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait to parochial economic interests, their longstanding border dispute, or a supposed American green light, as much of the literature has done, would be to obscure the unique historical moment and global milieu from which it sprang. By widening our view of the end of the Cold War to encompass Iraq, Saddam’s apprehensions about Soviet retrenchment, Israeli hostility, and unchecked American power come into focus. The Bush administration, for its part, would seize upon Iraq’s aggression as a golden opportunity to consummate unipolarity — ironically, the

very thing Saddam feared most. By casting the Gulf crisis as the first test of America’s mettle in this new age, Bush would render Iraq a stage on which to enact a post-Cold War order rather than a participant in its making. 

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174 CRRC SH-PDWN-D-000-533, “Saddam Meeting with a Soviet Delegation,” October 6, 1990.

175 CRRC SH-SHTP-D-000-611, “Saddam Meeting with Yasir Arafat Before the Gulf War,” January 1991.

176 PBS Frontline/BBC Oral History, Tariq Aziz, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/aziz/1.html>.

177 Bazzaz, *Harb talidu 'ukhra*, 36.