

Iraq: trajectory of a state



By Rhodri Evans

WHAT IS now Iraq was for centuries three provinces of the Ottoman Empire, ruled from Istanbul — Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. The three provinces were not particularly closely connected with each other. Basra was oriented to trade in the Gulf, Baghdad more to overland trade between Iran and Syria, and Mosul to Turkey.

As late as 1867, 35% of the rural population were nomads. The rest practiced agriculture with low productivity. In the Ottoman Empire all land was theoretically the property of the state. In daily practice most land was clan holdings.

Britain, long interested in the Gulf because it was an important link in the chain of communications and trade between London and India, conquered Iraq during World War One. After the war Britain and France secured a carve-up of the former Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire whereby France got Syria and Lebanon, and Britain Iraq, Jordan and Palestine.

Iraq was supposed to be held by Britain as a “League of Nations mandate”, not a simple colony. And during the war Britain, seeking Arab support, had promised that it would assist Arab independence after the war. To serve appearances, and to try to calm Arab resentment, Britain created an Iraqi monarchy — from an Arab warlord family originating in what would become Saudi Arabia. In fact British officials, and the British air force, ruled the country.

The British already knew there was oil in Iraq. Oil exports from Iran had started in 1919, under British control. From Iraq they would start in 1931. Most Iraqis saw none of the new oil wealth. It was a small enclave of the economy, isolated

from the rest. In the countryside Britain — following the model of its rule in India — created a pliant landlord class out of selected tribal shaykhs, and let the peasants rot under the landlords' domination.

In 1932 the League of Nations mandate officially ended. Britain, however, secured a treaty which enabled it to continue effective control. Or, rather, Britain was determined to keep control, treaty or no treaty. In 1941, during World War Two, an Arab nationalist, Rashid Ali, managed to oust the veteran, pliant, pro-British prime minister, Nuri al-Said. Rashid Ali was pro-Nazi, and pogroms against Baghdad's then-large Jewish population accompanied his rise to power; but the essential thing for the British was that he threatened British control. Britain promptly invaded to restore Nuri al-Said and effective British control.

Popular resentment against the British grew. Eventually, in July 1958, a group of army officers overthrew Nuri al-Said and the monarchy. They never established any regular democratic institutions, but the coup was followed by a real political opening-up and effervescence. Trade unions, newspapers and political parties grew.

The Iraqi Communist Party became by far the country's strongest, to the degree that in January 1959 it felt obliged to issue a public statement saying that no new members could be admitted to the party for the time being because its administrative capacities had been strained beyond the limit.

It was a Stalinist party with no historical background in independent working-class politics, having been formed as late as 1934. Nevertheless, it became the repository of the hopes and energies of many Iraqi workers and peasants who were encouraged by the widespread Arab revolts of the time against Western control (Algerian War of Independence; Egyptian nationalisation of Suez Canal, 1956) and wanted to go further to some sort of "socialism".

The options the party leadership saw were to plot for a new coup which would put themselves in power, in place of the incumbent Arab-nationalist and vaguely-socialistic army officers, in order to transform Iraq on the model of the USSR, or to accept those officers as the best that Iraq could get at the time and try to get reforms and political influence for the Communist Party by a combination of reliable support for them and judicious pressure.

That they chose the second option was not a "betrayal", or an abandonment of a possible socialist revolution, because the installation of Stalinism in Iraq would have converted the country into a prison for its workers. Nevertheless, it had disastrous effects both for the party's worker and peasant members and for its leaders.

In 1963, and again in 1968, there were coups organised by groupings within the army. Conflicts over intra-Arab politics — over whether, for example, Iraq should join the "United Arab Republic" which was announced by Egypt and Syria in February 1958 and continued, at least on paper, until 1962 — played a big part in the background to those coups, but in terms of Iraqi politics they were fundamentally shifts to the right, consolidating a more and more authoritarian military-based regime. The 1963 coup, in particular, was followed by large massacres of Communist Party members and supporters. The CP would be further decimated in the 1970s. By July 1978 the regime had a law which made reading the Communist Party newspaper punishable by death for all former members of the armed forces, i.e., in a country with universal conscription, all adult males.

The shift to the political right, however, did not stop the regime being "socialistic" in the sense of desiring state control and such "economic independence" as was feasibly open to Iraq. It retained friendly relations with the USSR even while massacring the Iraqi Communist Party. By 1982, 134,000 of the 173,000 workers in "large industrial establishments", "large" meaning with more than nine workers, were in state employment. Private capitalists continued to operate,

but depended for profits on state contracts and favours. This was not a capitalist order where the capitalists controlled the state by virtue of first having enriched themselves; it was the other way round, one where those who would get rich did so by first getting a post in the state machine, or the favours of someone in the state machine.

The decisive nationalisation, of the oilfields, was carried out in June 1972. Soon afterwards, with the big oil price rises of 1973-4, the Iraqi state was receiving revenues far outstripping anything the country's economy had known before. Although much was spent on prestige buildings and on equipping the army, ordinary Iraqis also benefited from a great expansion of education, health services, and public infrastructure. Agriculture decayed — Iraq, once a grain exporter, now has to import large amounts of wheat — but the government did not care. To put resources into improvements in agricultural productivity seemed pointless when the gains could only be a small fraction of the huge ones got from oil. Peasants fled the land, knowing that even a shanty-town hut and the chance of some casual work in the city would give them a better living than staying in the countryside, and 69% of the population was urban by 1980.

Above all, though, the oil revenues helped the dictatorship, now led by Saddam Hussein, to consolidate itself.

What Iraqi workers now needed was not for the country to become more “independent” — neither politically nor economically was more “independence” possible in the world as it was. What they needed, first of all, was democratic rights for trade-union and political activity, and links of solidarity with workers elsewhere in the Middle East which would open the possibility of the region's huge oil wealth being used for the common good rather than for the benefit of a few corrupt dictatorships.

What they got from Saddam Hussein, however, was an attempt to launch Iraq on a new “sub-imperialist” course. Iraq had longstanding border conflicts with Iran. Much of the border area, on both sides, is populated by Kurds who have good cause to detest both Iranian and Iraqi states. Iran sponsored and aided rebellions in Kurdish Iraq in return for a promise by the Kurds to stay quiet in Iran. Iran under the Shah both was a bigger power than Iraq in its own right, with a much larger population, and enjoyed strong support from the USA. In 1975 Iraq signed a deal on the border issues.

Then, however, the Iranian revolution of 1979, when Islamists leading a huge mass revolt overthrew the Shah, changed the terms. Saddam saw new possibilities and new threats. New threats: the Kurds, more assertive in Iran where the Islamic clerics still presided over tumult rather than a consolidated dictatorship, might become more assertive in Iraq. Iraq's Shi'a Muslims, who are reckoned to be a majority of its population, especially in the south, might sympathise with the Iranian Islamists, also Shi'a, against the Sunni elite ruling Iraq. Islamist groups in Iraq were agitating, and Iran's new rulers made no secret of their dislike for Iraq's secular regime.

New possibilities: since Iran was in turmoil, it might be defeated easily. Iraq could then seize territory from Iran, and replace Iran as the dominant regional power in the Gulf.

In the end it seems that Saddam miscalculated both on the threats and the possibilities. There was no Islamist revolt in Iraq; but Iran proved very capable of fighting back after Iraq invaded in 1980. The war continued for eight years, killing maybe half a million people and taking a huge economic toll. Outside powers were happy to keep it bubbling away, since as long as Iran and Iraq were locked in war neither could establish itself as the dominant regional power and threaten the others' interests. The USA, in particular, aided Iraq, especially in the last phase of the war, when it seemed that without such aid Iran could win a

clear victory.

The war ended in stalemate, in 1988. A little while afterwards the 1975 agreement was reinstated. On both sides all the deaths, injuries and damages were for nothing. Both governments, however, had used the war to establish permanent, terrorist, war-emergency regimes. The Iraqi regime massacred thousands of Kurds to consolidate Baghdad's always-shaky rule over them.

The horrors of the war evidently impressed Saddam much less than the augmentation of his personal power that came with it. In August 1990 he tried a new gambit of military expansion, annexing the neighbouring, small but oil-rich state of Kuwait.

Whether Saddam, over-confident from the USA's then-recent lavish support for him, really thought the USA would let him get away with that conquest, I do not know. In any case, the USA did not. In a war in 1991 it drove Iraq back out of Kuwait, at minimal cost of American lives but large cost of Iraqi civilian and conscript lives.

Significantly, the USA then publicly abandoned to their fate the Shi'a and Kurdish rebellions which erupted in Iraq after Saddam's defeat. It would rather deal with Saddam, or wait until some disgruntled general overthrew Saddam and then struck a deal with the USA, than take the risk of trying to maintain a puppet regime in Baghdad, or seeing the whole Iraqi state fragment and Iran gain stature in the region. Eventually, after some diplomatic wrangling, a semi-autonomous "safe haven" for the Kurds was established in a part of the Kurdish area, with some limited international protection.

The United Nations, prompted by the USA, introduced economic sanctions against Iraq, notionally to ensure that it scraps all "weapons of mass destruction" and does not build new ones. The USA must have hoped that the sanctions would produce results quicker. In fact they seem to have provided a nationalist rallying cry for Saddam to maintain his rule while the Iraqi people have been pauperised.

Saddam's political trump card for some time had been the claim to be the most militant Arab leader against "Zionism". Mostly he established the claim by speeches and bluster, enjoying the advantage that his state — unlike Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt, all of which he could denounce as weak — has no common border with Israel. In 1991, however, he fired a few rockets at Israel. The probability must be that, in any "endgame" war, Saddam, having nothing to lose, would throw whatever he could at Israel, hoping to take the maximum "Zionist" casualties and spread the war to the whole Middle East.

War, in the famous adage of Clausewitz much repeated by Marxists, is the continuation of policy by other means. We judge wars not by "who fired first" or "who attacked", but by the character of the established state policy which the war "continues" on either side. However criminal the USA's plans, on the Iraqi side the record makes it impossible to see the "policy" which Iraq's course towards war "continues" as essentially one of defence of its political independence and rights.

Since the 1970s, at least, Iraq's state policy has been essentially about trying to establish itself as a regional big power — a "sub-imperialist" centre. To do so it has repeatedly repressed smaller peoples — the Kurds, the population of Kuwait — and made war against its neighbours. Its policy towards Israel represents the worst Arab chauvinism, mitigated only by distance. The state's rule of fear against its own people goes hand in hand with its reactionary external policy.

Whatever about Bush's hypocrisy when he denounces the Iraqi dictatorship, Saddam's regime is as evil and as terrorist as any on earth. The USA's war plans should be opposed, not in the name of support for the Iraqi regime, but in the name of international democracy and working-class solidarity.